

# Contemporary Rites of Passage

Everyday States of Liminality and Transformation  
Through Journey and Play.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is developed as a counterpoint to more traditional rites of passage events highlighting current instances of transformational potential through the experiences of my adolescent children and their events and periods of liminal crisis. Through a multifarious series of visual art works, I explore the uncertain middle of liminal possibilities and struggles utilising everyday materials and collections of objects ‘we hold onto’ and their potential to act as psychological symbols in attending to a need for passages of meaning making.

Ritualised studio processes that play with actions of mothering care and attentiveness within adolescent passages include casting, molding, sifting, heating, wrapping, and knotting, investigating societal shifts from structure to antistructure where ambiguous and affective dimensions are glimpsed through the imaginal and an aliveness of this asocial world. Combining sculpture, with photography, textiles, photobooks, video and installation, the studio research improvises with both memory and the emergence of everyday experiences in the thick of adolescent periods of crisis and creative potential.

My studio-based and written research draws on theoretical resources in the fields of anthropology, psychology, and ritual studies with the work of husband-and-wife collaborators Edith and Victor Turner featuring prominently in my research project especially in relation to notions of subjunctive mothering and antistructure. My own work is centred within a larger body of art practice in artists from varying artistic disciplines such as Angelica Mesiti (Care), Louise Bourgeois (Church), Ben Quilty (Car), Cecilia Vicuna (Mud), and Sonia Gomes (Forest), with which I improvise to enrich the texture of the work.

With a focus on entanglements between midlife mothering and adolescent relations I argue that reinventing and renewing rites of passage for contemporary societies enables new potential symbols and forms of ritualisation to flourish which are vital in maintaining connections to nature and staying in mutuality (mutual attendance) with each other. The liminal symbolic and spatial area of such events provides an opening towards embodied knowledges and phenomena outside the dominant socio-economic systems of modern Western capitalism, order, and control, resisting such structural imperatives and ensuring the creative potential towards change continues to bloom.

## Statement of authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma. No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis. This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

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Kerryn Sylvia

20<sup>th</sup> August 2022



## Introduction

There will be moments when you will bloom fully and then wilt, only to bloom again. If we can learn anything from flowers, it is that resilience is born even when we feel like we are dying. **Alexandra Elle**<sup>1</sup>

This thesis explores rites of passage events during adolescence in the context of current Western societal structures drawing on contemporary creative practices. In the thick of adolescent passages of liminal wandering, searching, and meaning making, the research emerges out of a need to ritualise and mark, through a myriad of artistic processes and methodologies, glimpses into the uniqueness of journeys, stories, and experiences of my adolescent children. The work responds to my worry that amidst current globalist and capitalist societal structures such rites of passage rituals and practices are diminishing in frequency or are even in danger of disappearing altogether. It is prompted by my belief in a need for reinvention and renewal of what might constitute such passage rites events, holding on to some semblance of their importance in developing individual capacities towards growth and transformational potential that can then serve as generative sources of change and renewal on a wider communal level. In our increasingly complex and chaotic age we continue to heed the called to seek out situations, events, and experiences in the thresholds and interstices of things, connecting with knowledges beyond the boundaries of current rational and scientific forms of thinking and knowing and making ourselves relationally vulnerable and permeable towards each other in the process.

Like a gathering of gestures and offerings, this work grows out of expressions of the liminal qualities and moods of adolescent passages and does so from a culture of care, love, and the intersubjective entanglements of mothering children through these ambiguous and inarticulate territories. These are richly expressive of internal states and feelings for what goes on inside both hearts and minds. When gathering wisdoms pertinent to knowing how to live a life worth living, offerings of love towards these passages evolve as something partly inspired by scholarship and partly by the poetics of imagination. Generated out of a place of mothering

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<sup>1</sup> Elle Alexandra, *Neon Soul: A Collection of Poetry and Prose* (Missouri: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2017), p.52. From the poem Rebirth

care in empathetic response to what arises, staying with the struggles, troubles, and uncertainties of adolescence becomes a matter of matter, drawing on personal stories and working with materials and objects that hint at shifts in identity formation and are discerning of glimpses into the inner spark that can inspire both moments of spiritual development and personal transformation. Significant to the uniqueness and flows of these individual passages, the middle in-between spatial position of liminality becomes a zone where we are thought to become unmoored or adrift, and closer to a communion with qualities of antistructure with its interconnections, interactions, and forms of knowledge production residing outside of everyday routinised life.

The work stands as an artistic offering and validation towards adolescent passages as milestone moments and events wrapped up in the big questions around life, loss, rebirth, and renewal. These are only partially apprehended, glimpsed through fragments and entanglements of experiential and operative dimensions of mutually implicit interconnections, like a sense of things affectively knotted together within the meshwork of life. Perhaps it is possible to conceive that society awareness of itself might even come from the creation and flourishing of these liminal passages, holding their own inarticulate, unconscious, and uncontrollable powers which are menacing to other more established and punitive forms of authority. Such passages act as reminders that political power and societal laws are only ever held precariously, always teetering on some precipice of change as man-made constructs, controlled, and governed by the established systems of the time. There is a sense of invitation in the work for the adolescent experience to roam inside these liminal passages of potential and power, where a heart and gut embodied knowledge is given room to bloom amongst the paradoxical struggles and possibilities of in-between spaces. There is a potentiality in these passages of creating and renewing connections which are insights into knowledges shared by First Nations Australians that allow for intimate and legitimate explorations into the strengthening of those bonds between each other and nature. Such wisdom knowledges can be understood as pretheoretically derived understandings of how to live and thrive within current overarching Westernised structures of disconnection and separation that sometimes feel as if they drown out our abilities to touch and hold onto the connective tissue of these deeper relational connections.

In our quest to live a life of integrity and authenticity we come up against the inner perturbations and psychological crises of life that belong to periods of liminal wandering

within the haunting journey of spirit, psyche, and soul. The personal afflictions and moods of these liminal spaces hold their own insights into living and grappling with feelings that shape identities and actions, and in navigating these crises passages we open to the emergence of possible symbols that might renew and build resilience, enabling attitudes of ritualisation to endure. As a form of offering and voluntary gift-making, I adopt such a ritualistic frame of mind, making and playing with glimpses of what I can capture from within such ambiguous fields of inner consciousness that test out the emotional and behavioural boundaries of exploration, practice, and discovery within adolescent liminal passages. Ritualistic behaviours of making respond to my mothering impulse to mark and offer something in acknowledgement of these first paradoxical signs of freedom and responsibility you get in your teens. They play with the antiestablishment world view of adolescence that tests out the boundaries of things in culture and society, pushing and pulling to create a third space of tensions between them. Many artists also operate from these boundaries or edges, not fitting into the mainstream but residing instead in a tension between introversion and acting out, holding a belief in wonder and in the powerful forces and knowledges that reside in and belong to the profound potential at play in experiences of the world of more than we can see.



Figure 1: Kerryn Sylvia, *Sites of Teenage Trauma: Pumping Station at Lake Ranfurly* 2016, iPhone image from tuska teens photobook, 2022

In setting the scene out of which the work can authentically grow, and in the spirit of self-confession, it seems important to speak to an experience of initiation through my third child's story which occurred before the idea for this work came to fruition. Even though I have three children, my work for this thesis focuses mainly on the journeys of two of them with my youngest child present and represented only in subtle ways scattered throughout the work. Conditions for the occurrence for his particular and unique experience of initiatory passaging came unexpectedly through accident and injury when in 2015 we underwent five months at the Melbourne Royal Children's Hospital after he fell through the skylight of an old pumping station located on a salt pan near our family home with the image *Sites of Teenage Trauma: Pumping Station at Lake Ranfurly* (2016) becoming part of the photobook *tuska teens* (2022), developed for this practice-based work and discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three: The Church. Sunraysia's suburban sprawl has been slowly meandering out towards this once isolated saltpan and many houses are now on its doorstep making it easy access for inquisitive and intrepid explorers and a hangout for young adults and teens alike. *The Fall* (2015) was a gestural response to the immediacy of this traumatic event and its aftermath exhibited as part of a group exhibition during a quick trip back home to Mildura in-between many months of convalescence and hospitalisation.

While ritual theorist Ronald L. Grimes in his book *Deeply into the Bone: Re-inventing Rites of Passage* (2002) acknowledges the ongoing nature of initiatory moments he also questions the transitional depth and capacity of what he terms forms of "incidental and perceptual initiation."<sup>2</sup> From this experience with my son in hospital, it became clear that unintentional forms of incidental initiation have a capacity and just as strong a leaning towards circumstances for the creation of rites. Within my memories of mothering him through this experience each day becomes ritualised, ordinary time is lost and slowed, replaced by another more improvisational rhythm. Feelings, emotions, and sensations are heightened, and there is a calling to be fully present in the experience, entangled in each passing moment and milestone and relationally engaged through the experience in an intimate intensity of attentive love.

I have no doubt that my child's perceptually transitional teenage passage occurred for him through this accidental experience and its affectively emotional impacts rippled throughout

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald L. Grimes, *Deeply into the bone: Re-inventing Rites of Passage* (California: University of California Press, 2002), p.89.

the family. As Jungian analyst Robert L. Moore in his book *The Archetype of Initiation: Sacred Space, Ritual Process and Personal Transformation* (2001) tells us “tragedy or catastrophe sometimes forces people into these transitions. They get slapped around by life experience so traumatic that humility is their only recourse,”<sup>3</sup> and my son explains this sentiment as reflective of his slow recovery and inner building of resilience and determination which he seemed to face with such grace and patience.

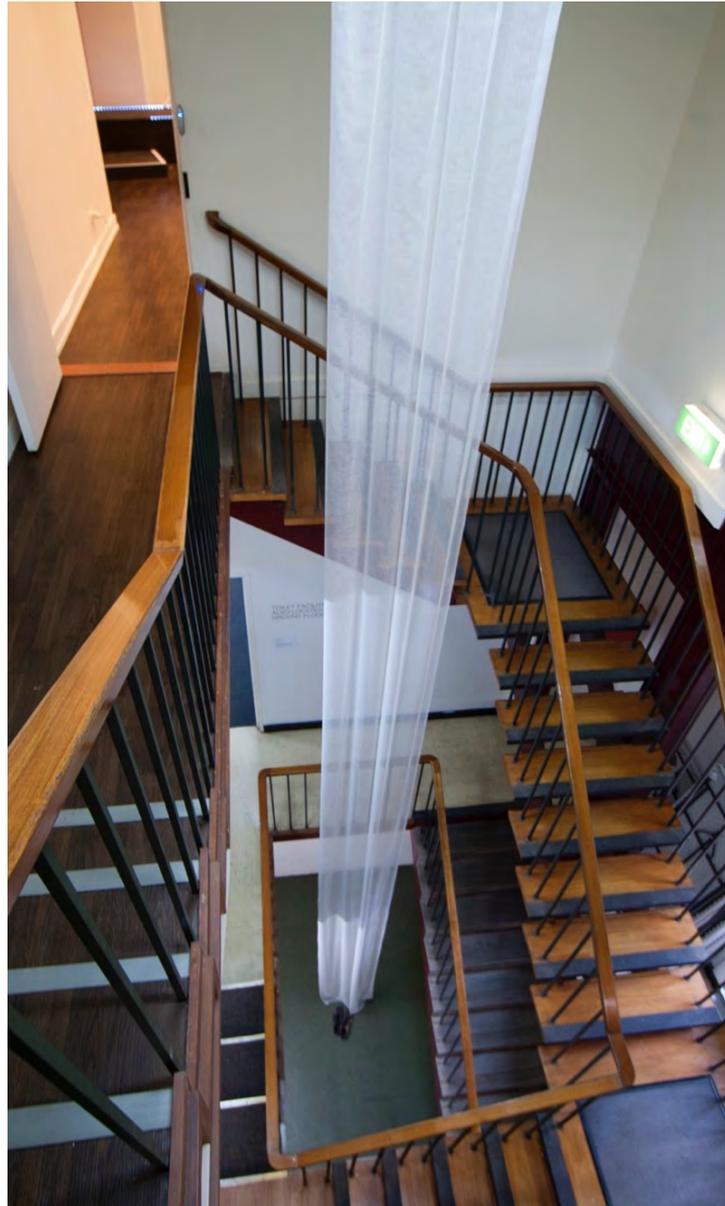


Figure 2: Kerry Sylvia, *The Fall* 2015, site specific installation in stairwell, muslin, muddy shoes, 10m x 45cm, Mildura Arts Centre

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<sup>3</sup> Robert L. Moore, *The Archetype of Initiation: Sacred Space, Ritual Process, and Personal Transformation* (USA: Xlibris Corporation, 2001), p.22.

The installation of *The Fall* (2015) explored the inherent and poetic qualities of materials and how their placement in a specific space can work as a gestural reaction dealing with the drama of events you cannot change or hope to control. A ten meter long drop of muslin gently fell from ceiling to floor in a protective mothering attempt to reimagine and soften the descent while also trying to come to terms with the horror and severity of falling such a long way and the miraculous luck of living to tell the tale. On the floor beneath the muslin were my son's muddy shoes from the event. The work was a poetic expression into the excessive nature of the incident dealing with experiences that potential transform and shape us and can be thought of as an event of crisis and trauma that is a rite of passage for both the individual and their extended communal family. It drew attention towards an appreciation for our shared realities that theories of relational psychoanalysis, such as those explored by Jessica Benjamin in *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third* (2018). Her feminist approach to intersubjective analysis builds around a sense of the "nascent thirdness of emotional attunement,"<sup>4</sup> and a recognition of its qualities and shared patterns of affective resonances which will be discussed further in Chapter Five: The Forest.

In honour of this togetherness of emotional responses and the way in which we take on the affective shape of each other's experiences, my mother wrote of my son's story in May of 2016 in which the immediacy of the 'fall' has been replaced with the past tense of 'fell', perhaps as a restorative gesture towards pushing the trauma of the event back into the annuals of memory and personal mythology. The following is a transcript of her story which she has graciously allowed me to share.

### ***The Boy who Fell***

*What happens when you fall; maybe you graze your knee, maybe break an arm, sometimes to fall means that you have in some way disgraced yourself. Fall in the Northern Hemisphere is also what we know as autumn, once again, those beautifully coloured leaves fall to the ground. How can one tiny word have so much significance and affect so many lives in so many ways. Two boys out for an afternoon*

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<sup>4</sup> Jessica Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third* (London, New York Routledge, 2018), p.38.

*jaunt, two twelve-year old's who would not harm a mouse, two boys with not a bad bone in their beautiful young bodies. Then came the fall, just a step and one of them fell through the skylight of a small pump cover, he fell nine and half metres, missing concrete protrusions, steel steps, valves, and other assorted paraphernalia to land slap bang on the concrete floor. His shocked mate ran and ran to get help, police, ambulance and then the SES arriving to help rescue this poor boy who fell. It took forty-five minutes to get him up out of the hole and into the ambulance and by the time his parents were notified, he was already at the hospital. The boy who fell was conscious the whole time, talking to the paramedics and assisting them with the treatment of his injuries. A plane flight to the children's hospital in the nearest city was quickly arranged, there the best of the best in the medical contingency were waiting. Eight and a half hours of surgery followed, during which the extent of the injuries was revealed, the only parts of his body not injured in any way was his left arm and his eye lashes. Then came recovery, many nights with parents at his side, hospital for the long-term, many tears of pain and frustration and a grim determination to achieve small steps every day to eventually be able to run and jump and play once again. What a small word to cause so much pain and anguish for so many. What a small word that can bring out the love and care of parents, siblings, grandparents, relatives, and friends. The boy who fell; this is his story.*

This research explores creative works concerned with capturing glimpses into the reality of such moments in all their illusiveness and aliveness, paying exquisite attention to and engaging with the intimacies, messiness and hurly-burly of adolescent passages using practices of improvisation, metaphor, and a poetic sensibility. The work accepts that what we do want is our uniqueness and those of our stories, even the messier parts, to be celebrated and acknowledged with love and grace, and plays with the fragments of symbols and symbolic actions we catch hold of and sense within these passages.

## Chapter outlines

In imagining a continuum for rites, their ritualistic symbols, and behaviours to continue to flourish within the complexities of current contemporary societal structures Chapter One: The Car looks at the great paradoxical freedoms and responsibilities that come with obtaining the first car during adolescence, reinventing, and reworking the shell of the object through actions of making, mothering, and maintenance. The chapter explores the symbolic potential of the car as part of the drama of unfolding events belonging to the story and struggles of my teenage son's passage current journey from adolescence to adulthood, acknowledged through memories that reflect on the significance of my own teenage rite of passage experience. The car as a liminal space is theorised as a metaphorical adolescent cocoon in which to nurture transformational possibilities and offers space to reflect on the way we currently refer to first obtaining a licence as a rite of passage, but concurrently also seem to fail to build around it passages for experiences of adequate and unique ritualisation, adopting instead only loose structures and a lack of supportive recognition for such progressions and legal milestones

The application of artistic conventions towards crossovers between unfolding real time events and processes of making are theorised in this chapter through the work of anthropologist Tim Ingold in his 2013 book *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art, and Architecture*<sup>5</sup> where knowledge grows out of actively following along with materials and processes that become an embodied affective source of creation engaging ritualised modes of making. A focus of this chapter lies in revealing the entanglements of intersubjective experiences that require going along with the situations at hand, which for me means mothering my sons experience with the vehicle as a source of intense anxiety and guilt but also as a holding space of possibilities.

Throughout this chapter there is a conflicting sense of urgency and futility towards softening and actively sharing this adolescent societal rite of passage through intimate and engaged practices of making and the alchemical and poetic musings of depth psychologist Matt Licata and potter/poet Mary Caroline Richards offer insights into attuning to an embodied experience of liminal encounters within our own lives and those of others within such uncertain passages, as we wait for transformational experiences and rhythms of meaning making to develop and unfold.

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<sup>5</sup> Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013).

Chapter Two: The Care operates implicitly from a heartfelt intersection between experiences of adolescent liminal passage and performative mothering actions situated within the biological and cultural midlife cycle of life. It reveals a midlife mothering impulse of nostalgic or sentimental care related through things and memorabilia imbued with symbolic value that hold resonances of the developmental patterns of my children's youth and social lives. In exploring artistic ways of relating to both social and psychological characteristics of social life I utilise concepts formulated by anthropologist Victor Turner to express an awareness for the social ground of drama, acknowledging its power to liberate us from normative demands of social structure through engagement with more theatrical and subcutaneous dimensions of experience. The chapter explores my improvisational experiments into the performative purposes and potential of ritualisation utilised through art making practices, where actions of mothering and making mingle and it becomes difficult to decipher or determine where one gesture or process finishes and the other begins. Knowledge grows out of a sense of the collective drama emanating from such moments revealing a knotted and shared sense of intersubjective experience and a metaphorical dynamic at play that remains caught within the residual fragments and collections of stuff we keep and hold onto.

In this chapter wooden tree knots are harnessed as metaphorical fragments for symbolically knotting and holding, inviting us into symbiosis with such relational connections and entanglements of psychological and emotional complexities. I utilise the knots as a way of improvising and dealing with the knotted feelings and ongoing emotions between mothering and those of a rupturing nature in the awkward teenage years, and they become symbolic markers of action accessed through repetitive processes and gestures of making. Drawing on a long and ancient history theorised through the wisdoms of First Nations Aboriginal scholar Tyson Yunkaporta, the knotty forms are played with and cared for through a daily ritualistic and repetitive practice of casting and making, offering a creative way to delve into deeper connection with these natural forms and access their potential towards revelations into a shared patterning of imagined and encoded knowledge and metaphysical bonds between us, nature, and each other. Relational connections are also explored in this chapter through spiritual and rapturous dimensions of performance at play in the work of artist Angela Mesiti.

Chapter Three: The Church investigates liminal passages, their role and function in relation to entanglements between adolescence, mothering, art making practices, and my artwork. It contemplates the creation of youth-derived sacred spaces as liminal interstices and is engaged

with capturing something of the drama of real-time unfolding events and experiences through the plethora of images and objects erupting from within and around the space. The chapter dwells on the pseudo spiritual significance of such spaces for youth in designing their own alternative adolescent cultural experiences outside of the world of adults away from the rigidities of societal structures and institutions. It acknowledges my mothering compulsion to stay with and remain attentive to the ways we are driven in attempting to alter our realities and enact ludic forms of play outside of the socially acceptable constraints, norms, and rules of society.

The chapter is engaged with creating meaningful ways of experiencing the messy business of liminal passages within our unique life stories and my practice-based research is framed around the idea that at best we are only ever able to sense or capture momentary glimpses into the flow of these interstices. Through the ideas of anthropologist Victor Turner, the chapter theorises possibilities for liminal ludic forms of ritual reinvention to flourish out of the ordinary contexts of contemporary everyday life where the plethora of images and objects erupting from the space are experimented with through multifarious artistic methods and contexts. These I improvise with through a midlife mothering mindset of care and an attentive compulsion towards staying with adolescent forms of risky and unpredictable play, embodying the instability and emotions attached to these feelings through loving actions of making in mutuality with unfolding events. The chapter explores the improvisational element through the philosophical meditations of musician and author Stephen Nachmanovitch in his book *The Art of Is: Improvising as a Way of Life*<sup>6</sup> (2019) who ponders the imaginal and symbolic patterns of such interactions as a way of going along with and giving life to forms of relationship. The last section of this chapter discusses the artworks of Louise Bourgeois through critiques on her early sculptures by art historicist Mignon Nixon and art critic Robert Storr to reflect on my artworks as symbolically representative of psychological inner landscapes, referring to their fragile and emotional entanglements through combinations of transformed materials, knots, shadows, and natural wooden elements.

In Chapter Four: The Mud I focus on passages of adolescent identity formation through dirt which as a substance in its muddy form becomes symbolic of allegorical liminal states and conditions of uncertainty and transformational potential operating throughout my studio-based

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen Nachmanovitch, *The Art of Is Improvising as a Way of Life* (California: New World Library, 2019).

research. The chapter explores a subjunctive mood of possibilities within currents of such instability where contexts of dirt hold their own disorderly residual powers originally theorised in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*<sup>7</sup> (2002) through the inarticulate and unstructured musings of anthropologist Mary Douglas. In this chapter I use ideas suggested by psychologist James Hillman and poet Mary Caroline Richards into the archetypal and alchemical significance of materially dreaming with such matter, embracing its qualities of instability and precariousness towards the transformation, and reshaping of psyche, and for feeding the imagination and renewing the capacity of social structures. Kathleen Stewart in 'Afterword: Worlding refrains'<sup>8</sup> (2010) also offers insights in connections between liminal spaces and bloom spaces, drawing attention through her prose into the generative sources and sediments of affective relations that she suggests call us towards a heightened sensory communion and attentiveness with experiences like those residing within the shifting terra forma of identity formation.

In Chapter Five: The Forest revolves around the production of a metaphorical liminal space of relational and atmospheric dimensions conceived through a multifarious meandering of objects, elements, and materials that coalesce together within the installation *Foresting the Uncertain Middle* (2022). This chapter imagines adolescent experiences of liminal passage through temporal psychic cuts and metaphorical tears in the fabric of society that appear through processes of heat-treating and transforming mundane materials of use that were once part of the rhythms and history of everyday familial life. My artworks in this installation gather as growths and developments inviting an audience to explore ideas around holding onto, letting go of, and dancing in mutuality with each other. Like a poetic forest of symbols, the installation acts as an offering towards glimpses into the mood and feelings of the uncertain middle ground of liminal inarticulations and ambiguities at the interstice of adolescence and midlife mothering. In the chapter the meandering of elements and alchemical remnants discussed as parts of the metaphorical forest dance around notions of structural precarity and antistructure lingering within a liminal register of affective dimensions. The chapter is invested in reinventing something out the fragments and glimpses into what goes on internally within adolescent passages of transformational potential from a state, place, and time of

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge Classics, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Stewart, "AFTERWORD Worlding Refrains," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Gregg. and Gregory J. Seigworth. Melissa (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2010).

liminal essence and a sense of entanglement in mothering and going along with the liminal inner world of the other. In the chapter the work of Sonia Gomes is a focus for discussing liminal possibilities and connections through her biomorphic sculptural assemblages.

### **Background: art and adolescent interlude**

Central to this research is a practice-based exploration oscillating between honouring and making offerings towards a sense of implicated mutuality with the liminal journeys and experiences of my own adolescent children. Through this process and from a place of intimate and empathetic entanglements, I seek insights into their inner journeys and a sense of the shared intersubjective emotional and psychological states both felt and experienced together. Potentially such research offers more complex understandings of everyday states of liminality where rites of passage are marked through artistic responses and ritual methodologies, giving form to such experiential formlessness, and like the revelatory experience of religiousness, imbuing our contemporary lives with meaning along the way. Revelatory experiences like those of religiousness, inclusive of spirituality of all kinds, propose to imbue our lives with something contemplative, emotional, and affective (relating to meaning, moods, feelings, and attitudes.) This research questions how the artist/mother, through a mutuality of attending and caring might discover a nuanced engagement with the phase of liminality during adolescent rites of passage. It asks how, in revising and reinventing what might constitute a contemporary rite of passage, we can broaden our conceptions of ritualisation processes to develop a greater awareness of their occurrence within experiences of the everyday. How can everyday material/matter be imbued with certain symbolic powers of meaning through improvisational and ritualised processes of making? If our society requires a revision of what might constitute contemporary rites of passage, how might the artist/mother contribute to understandings of the significance of journey and transition within the experiences of her own children?

A catalyst for this practice-led research came out of a comment made about an artist statement I wrote for *Uplifted* (2017), an exhibition held at Gallery F (an artist run gallery in Mildura). This exhibition investigated a term coined by environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht in his essay 'Solastalgia: A New Concept in Health and Identity' (2005) to express "the pain or sickness caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory...a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at

‘home’<sup>9</sup> which I related to the physical destruction of the immediate environment due to a freak mini tornado that hit Mildura in November 2016. The exhibition featured pinhole and toy 3D camera images along with video of the aftermath and destruction of the severe storm and freak mini tornado. For the exhibition, an installation of basic art materials was cordoned off in the work *Sites of severity: de/construction* (2017) in the centre of the gallery, along with objects and materials collected from sites of the storm’s devastation.



Figure 3: Kerry Sylvania, *Uplifted* (installation view) 2017, 3D toy camera grid of images, 3D glasses, Gallery F Artist-Run Space



Figure 4: Kerry Sylvania, *Sites of Severity: De/construction* 2017, collected uprooted organic materials, art kit, projector, construction tape, Gallery F Artist-Run Space

Using only these limited materials and objects it was my aim to continue the work in the gallery space throughout the duration of the month-long period and transform the space with a new body of work that would culminate in a final closing exhibition. During this time of experimentation, I found myself developing and playing with many of the processes I am currently engaged in with this research.

<sup>9</sup> Glenn Albrecht, "Solastalgia. A New Concept in Health and Identity," *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature*, no. 3 (2005): p.45. Albrecht, "Solastalgia. A New Concept in Health and Identity."

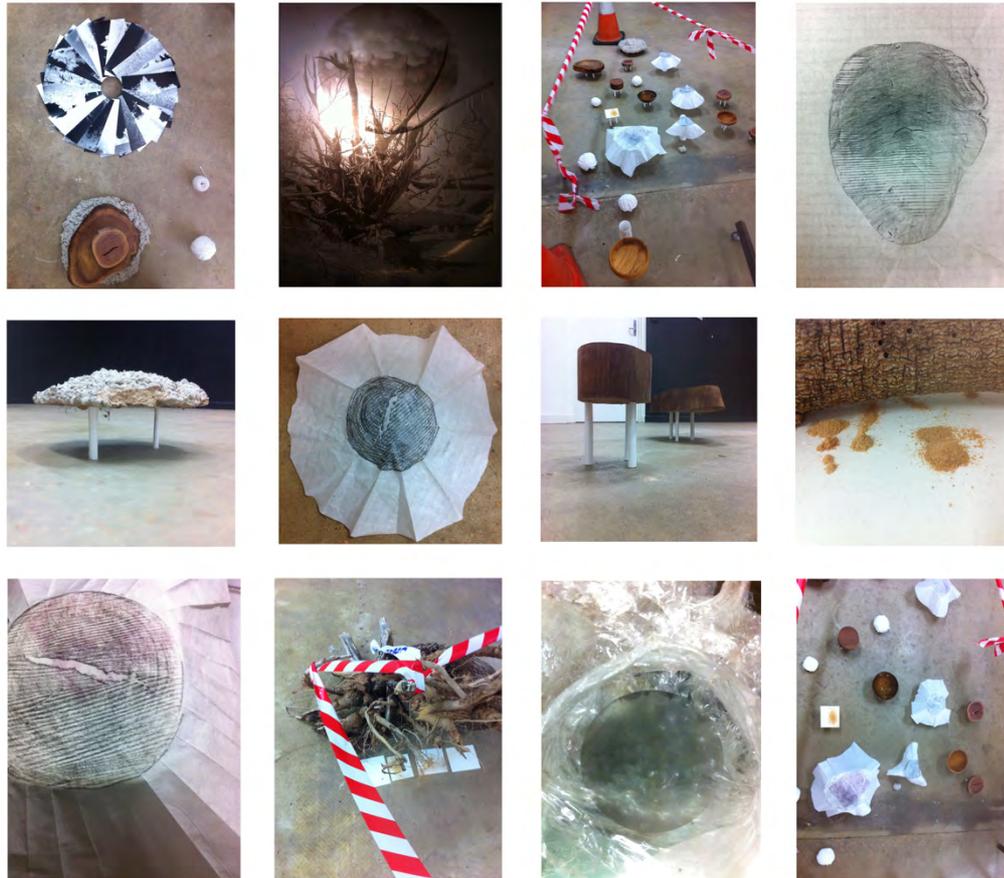


Figure 5: Kerryn Sylvia, *Process Grid for Balancing Act: Cycle and Aftermath* 2017, frottage, melting, casting, moulding, sifting, balancing, projecting, Gallery F Artist-Run Space

The artist statement read:

The physical aftermath contained in the images depict massive, uprooted trees and debris along with flooded and swollen backwaters. My emotional mediation on these images saw them as symbols of my daughter leaving our family home to embark on the next part of her life’s journey and my own motherly surprise at feeling swollen, knotted, and homesick at her physical loss from me. Literally she has been uprooted from me and lifted away to her new ‘place’.

A comment made about the work suggested that maybe it was “a bit of a stretch to incorporate that section about your daughter into the work as it wasn’t really about that was it?”<sup>10</sup> The above two elements of existential distress caused by environmental change and my daughters

<sup>10</sup> Comment by Win Moser May 2017, Gallery F Mildura artist run space

impending change to our lived circumstance became the starting point for the development of the new work enacted within the gallery space, an exploration of the precariousness of balance, both ecological and emotional but also metaphorically moving towards the emotional tug of war between holding on or up and letting go. I observed a correlation between the storm induced trauma the land had experienced and my own loss of equilibrium after my daughter left home.

Reflecting on this work at the time of making it led me to focus on my daughter's experience of transition as she started her new life and home. What was this period of transition like, how long did it take, and could I give it a name? Was it possible to see this as a critical time of experience in her life and if so, how? What were the daily rituals that marked her journey, and could they be viewed as contemporary forms of rites? The questions kept coming giving rise to a connection with my own transitional experience, which I now recognise as a critical subjective imperative informing and shaping the instigation of this research into rites of passage.



Figure 6: Kerryn Sylvia, *Balancing Act: Cycle and Aftermath (Swirl)* 2017, dirt, wooden bowls, concrete, photograms, pinhole negatives, frottage, drawing on paper, Gallery F Artist-Run Space

### ***The Genesis of rites in a small city: memories of my teenage self***

*The car screeched to a stop and the crunch of the tyres gripped on the gravel with a slight jerk that lulled me from my position in the backseat of the car. Wrapped up in a tangle of arms and legs, sweat and breath, there were more of in the back of the Ford Laser than normal. That's right, my brother and his friends who had come along for the ride making the backseat cramped beyond capacity, the warmth and depth of other bodies squashed up against mine. Another leap of consciousness and long after the thrill of living has gone...I think I know that sound/s or song and then another voice, "no one get out of the car, I'm taking a quick piss". Was that part of the lyrics? I don't remember that bit. Somewhere as I am being roused by the clenching deep inside an urgency towards relief consumes me. I hear a click and the pressure of the swing followed by the slam of the car door that fully rouses me..." Oh yeh l said life goes on" ... yes, I know this song. I extricate myself from the tangled chaos and comfort of the backseat and reach for the door handle and gently click it open suddenly conscious of trying not to wake anyone else. Rolling through the door the cool of the night air hits me like a slap and I am immediately jolted awake. I look back at the car full of bodies nestled deep in sleep together and wonder why its only me that feels the urge to pee. I step off into the darkness and feel the sharp gravel on my bare feet, treading gingerly and heading off towards the edge of the shadows. Finding a spot, I squat down and do my business and feel the welcomed sense of relief mingled with the anticipation of now being able to join the others in the warmth of the backseat for the rest of the drive home. I finish and head back in the direction of the car and grab the car door in my hand.*

*Suddenly the car revs to life and powers off down the road, speedway style, almost ripping my arm off with the sudden and unexpected*

*movement. I hear the gears change with lightning speed as if it was on a racetrack. I stand there watching the car lights grow smaller and smaller into the distance. It is like a scene out of a movie, it seems so familiar, like something I have watched 100 times before. Someone would have noticed my hand on the car door, I think I almost had it open...did I open it just a bit? Is that why it grabbed at my arm like that? Someone will notice I am not there in a minute. The car lights are only just visible on the horizon now. The way the car sped off I don't think they knew I got out of the car. Did someone say not to? Do I recall that? Maybe I do or it could have been on the radio. Now I'm confused and slightly panicked. Will someone realise I'm not there? With all those extra bodies in the backseat maybe not. The car lights have completely disappeared now, been swallowed up in the darkness, engulfed in the shadows of the road. A knot starts to swell deep in my belly, and I can feel it rising slowly up and around, chorusing through me, consuming my core and outer extremities. "It's cold" I say out loud to the silence and darkness all around me, and think, there's still a chance they might realise and come back. But I'm not confident. That car took off like it was sure of its destination, it wasn't a joke, I'm not being punished for not following directions. I'm pretty sure dad said no-one get out of the car, yes, I'm certain now...they don't know! Shit they are going to be pissed. "It's really cold", I say out loud again and realise I am only dressed in an oversized t-shirt and shorts, no shoes, it's the middle of winter. I shudder and slowly weave my arms inside the shirt to hide them from the iciness of the bitter night air.*

*It must be sometime in the early morning by now. We had been travelling back from a speedway meeting in Adelaide and it didn't finish till after midnight. I calculate it must be about 3am or so. Not much traffic on the road at this time of the morning. I take one last look down the road from the direction that the car vanished and take*

*a large breath of the air into my lungs. For the first time I look around me and take stock of my surroundings. I am slightly shaking but I don't know if that's from the shock of this predicament or the cold. I am standing on the gravel edge of the road like an armless ghost, there are no streetlights and I become conscious of the flapping of flags over my shoulder. The wind is quite strong, and the noise of the flags grows even more intense as I turn in their direction. I realise I am at an abandoned service station. It's an old Esso, the flags are blue, red, and white. Somehow the sound of them slapping together is calming so I concentrate on it, letting it wash over me as I take stock of the situation. It dawns on me I should be much more panicked than I feel. There is something even ironic and slightly humorous about this situation...but only slightly. I am all on my own for the first time in my life. What I decide to do next is up to me and me alone. This realisation is somehow empowering and exhilarating, rich with the potential of the unknown. If only it wasn't so bloody cold. I wish I had a jacket.*

My own experience was finished during an evening and had a profound effect on me and what I view as my development as an individual. I think of this experience as my own adolescent crisis rite. In this moment I realised in myself some sense of resilience and strength, a capacity for the dealing with the unexpected that I knew was in me and would be with me for the rest of my life. It was all over and done with in a night, the temporal nature of the rite highlighting how diverse individual rites can be in time and form. It came out of a forced separation from my family, followed by a period of liminality and then finally incorporation, when I finally made it home. I remember feeling like I was fully alive, living on my whits, trusting my intuition implicitly along with some other force testing me, outside of my control, that was evident but unnameable. It was a moment of chaos in which I had to think and act creatively and recognised the potential in the experience as one of personal growth and transition from one phase of life to another.

In the end I hitchhiked home. The first car that pulled up was an old beaten up Torana. As soon as it pulled over, I knew I was not getting in the car with that group of people, but they did let me know I was near Waikerie, and it was an hour walk into the centre of town. They asked me what I was doing and I said waiting for my parents who would be back any minute to get me or who had called the police by now (this is all pre-mobile phone) to get me. They took off without any fuss and left me there. The second car that pulled up contained two men in their twenties, it had a smashed headlight and dented front end. One man was asleep in the backseat and the other said he was heading to Mildura and would be happy to give me a ride if I talked to him all the way. The ride was uneventful, and we chatted the two hours and twenty minutes while the other guy slept. When I walked in the door in the wee hours of the morning there were hysterics, my dad screaming at me in panic, a police officer taking notes and my mum grabbing me in a suffocatingly motherly embrace. The policeman did not believe they had simply left me behind on the side of the road. He briefly interviewed the two guys that came in with me for a welcomed cup of tea break as they were intending on powering through in their hire car (which I discovered had hit a kangaroo sometime earlier) all the way home to Sydney.

I often return to this moment throughout my life when there are choices to be made and I need to think creatively to decide on the next steps to be taken, in the knowledge that things can go either way. Perhaps living as an artist has ensured my practice dwells in the chaos of creative potential, the uncertainty of the suspension phase, a period without rules where I can exert a quiet confidence in myself learnt from this rite of passage experience. It is this knowledge I draw on in attending to my adolescent children moving through their own phases of transition from one state of their lives to another. The social phenomena of rites and rituals that demarcate their experiences are not be trivialised and are mediated through the discarded materials and transitional objects that reflect their inner journeys and give them meaning.

## History: rites of passage and ritual

The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another. **Arnold van Gennep**<sup>11</sup>

This scholarly work examining rites of passage covers a broad range of fields inclusive of anthropology, ethnography, philosophy and psychology and social sciences. This makes it a complex and fascinating area of possibilities for visual arts research in contemplating a history and structure of the social phenomena of rites of passage rituals that were devised as therapeutic, consolatory expressions of social thought in a First Nations and religious capacity. The rites discussed have to do with life crises and initiation rituals related to the period of transition from adolescence to adulthood. From historian of religion Mircea Eliade<sup>12</sup> (1985), to ritual theorist Ronald Grimes<sup>13</sup> (2020) and many other theorists between, it is held that ritualised spaces allowing for rites of passage to occur are found less and less as part of our current societal structures, and this has become apparent in attending to my children as they negotiate the difficult passage from adolescence to adulthood. To accommodate for this lack or loss of ritual through the celebration of rites, there is an argument that advocates for a broadening of current conceptions to ensure the developmental lessons of personal discovery can continue to develop and co-exist within the current climate of perceived societal modalities of extreme individualisation and secularisation. The potential towards renewal and prominence for these ritualised spaces as markers of rites through engagement with material processes becomes a practical response to this ancient spiritual and physical/psychological way of moving through the everyday lived experience.

French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep coined the term rites of passage in 1909. In his book, *The Rites of Passage* (1960), he wrote of the magico-religious foundations of the sacred in ancient historical and First Nations communities, but his work also highlighted current Western societies absence or lack of ritual through rites of passage as a meaningful demarcation of movement from one state of being to another. Van Gennep defined rites of passage broadly as “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and

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<sup>11</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1960), pp.2-3.

<sup>12</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> Ronald Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies* (Waterloo, Canada: Ritual Studies International (RSI), 2020).

age”<sup>14</sup> and established a threefold schema of “rites of separation, transition rites and rites of incorporation”.<sup>15</sup> In American anthropologist Solon Kimball’s ‘introduction’ to *The Rites of Passage* (1960), he points out van Gennep’s unique contribution was in the “analysis of ceremonies accompanying an individual’s life crisis” and in our increasingly secularised urban world there is no evidence that “the need for ritualised expression of an individual’s transition from one status to another” has lessened.<sup>16</sup> Rather the social devices to achieve the new transitional adjustment have diminished forcing individuals “to accomplish their transitions alone and with private symbols.”<sup>17</sup> Author and editor Louise Carus Mahdi in the preface to the book *Crossroads: The Quest for Contemporary Rites of Passage* (1996) further suggests that “one reason for the great demand of psychiatric services for adolescence today may be absence of socially sanctioned rites of passage”<sup>18</sup> which speaks to this natural hunger and deep thirst for initiation rites in modern society.

Van Gennep’s classification of rites include but are not limited to purification ceremonies, lifecycle ceremonies, initiation and crisis rites that can be either social or religious transformations and are often an overlap of both. For van Gennep there is a definable rhythm to human life like a series of passages from one state to another, something comparable “to the great rhythms of the universe”.<sup>19</sup> There are always new thresholds to cross (birth, adolescence, maturity, old age, and death) throughout an individual’s lifecycle and these require a period of submission “to ceremonies whose forms often vary but whose function is similar”.<sup>20</sup>

Sociologist Emile Durkheim in the book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995) connects rites with religious phenomena, the fluid nature of sacredness and the accepted existence within rites of passage of sacred things and objects. Furthermore, there is a split between two worlds in Durkheim’s theory; that in which all objects and actions are viewed as sacred and that in which all are viewed as profane.<sup>21</sup> Eliade (1985) also wrote in depth about initiation rites for First Nations peoples and viewed these rites as “the passage from ‘chaos’

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<sup>14</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1969), p.94.

<sup>15</sup> Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, p.11.

<sup>16</sup> Solon Kimball, "Introduction," in *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1960), p.vii.

<sup>17</sup> Kimball, "Introduction," pp.xvii-xviii.

<sup>18</sup> Mahdi Louise Carus., Christopher Nancy Geyer., and Meade Michael., eds., *Crossroads: The Quest for Contemporary Rites of Passage* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1996), p.xvii.

<sup>19</sup> Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, p.194.

<sup>20</sup> Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, p.189.

<sup>21</sup> Durkheim Émile, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, ed. Karen E. Fields, Religious life, (New York: Free Press, 1995), p.34.

into creation”.<sup>22</sup> In these cultures, a symbolic death along with a period of chaos which is indispensable to the rite ensures the beginning of new life. Eliade’s echoes Kimball’s ‘lessening’ of ritual structure mentioned above, further stating that in current modern society initiation as an experience has almost vanished altogether. It is with these sentiments in mind that the research undertaken through the production of artworks addresses this lack or lessening of ritual for marking and valuing rites which is considered fundamentally important both to a healthy structured society and to the individuals experience within that society. From the perspective of the attuned artist and mother, who is constantly watching and attentive, I am arguing for a broadening and re-evaluation for marking these rites which contribute to understandings of the significance of journey and transition within the experiences of my children.

Rites of passage rituals are a thought to be a fundamental part of human experience and range from the structurally complex and challenging to the most ordinary of gestures transforming them into symbolic expressions, their meaning often reinforced through repetition and patterning. Ritual practices often serve social and cultural functions, but they also operate on a psychological level for the inner world of the individual – it is this space I investigate in my studio practice. In his book *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982) anthropologist Victor Turner’s understanding for the structure and progression of rituals relies on the theoretical three phase framework developed for rites of passage by van Gennep outlined above.<sup>23</sup> Turner explains that while not all rituals are considered as rites of passage, those rituals that are comprise of a large and important category including a “processional form of ‘passage’”.<sup>24</sup> Durkheim further distinguishes rites from other human practices as beliefs with certain meanings and “objects of a different kind”,<sup>25</sup> special in nature and reliant on shared social understandings. For Turner, liminality is an important stage identified in the initiatory kind of rites of passage, and for the purposes of this study it is the liminal phase that remains most pertinent to the research.

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<sup>22</sup> Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, p.8.

<sup>23</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), p.24. A more expanded understanding of these stages is also given by research professor Mihai I. Spariosu, in *The Wreath of Wild Olive: Play, Liminality, and the Study of Literature*, (United States of America: State University of New York press), p.33. He states “In the first stage, the “initiant” or neophyte is isolated from the rest of the community through a rite the separates sacred from secular time and space; during the transition, which van Gennep calls “margin” or “limen” (meaning “threshold” in Latin), the initiant goes through an ambivalent social phase or limbo. During the final stage of incorporation or “reaggregation,” the initiant returns to a new and relatively stable position in the society at large”.

<sup>24</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.24.

<sup>25</sup> Émile, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, p.34.

## Rites and the liminal

The term liminal, deriving from Latin 'limen' means a threshold or boundary, a corridor between two different spatiality's. Van Gennep describes it metaphorically as an entrance into "a house, the movement from one room to another, or the crossing of streets and squares".<sup>26</sup> Sitting between separation and incorporation this liminal/transitional phase, is also described as the result of the exit from normal social life and the entrance into a threshold phase where everyday notions of identity, time, and space are temporally suspended. During the liminal phase of rites, participants engage in mimetic activity re-enacting the crisis motivating the ritual. In so doing, the structures of everyday social life are challenged by a physical and magico-religious justification. In van Gennep's explanation this liminal phase of transition becomes a "symbolic and spatial area" in which "one wavers between two worlds"<sup>27</sup> from one position to another.

Turner, in agreeance with van Gennep refers to the liminal phase as spatial transitions in which behaviours and symbolism are neither in or out of society, but rather, suspended units of space and time that exist outside of the values and norms of social structure.<sup>28</sup> During a liminal period "characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state"<sup>29</sup> and is held in condition of social limbo. Initiands dwell in a condition of ambiguity, "they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial".<sup>30</sup> For Turner the liminal phase in rites of passage is both structurally and physically invisible and liminal persons become threshold people that exist outside of cultural space. Liminality then is viewed "as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action...potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs".<sup>31</sup> and functions as both phase and as a "religious or quasi-religious state".<sup>32</sup> Turner uses the concept of liminality with reference to all cultural phenomena confusing social status and transgressing norms but also stresses that liminality is a concept belonging to liminal rites in First Nations societies, pre-industrial societies and for similar situations in post-

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<sup>26</sup> Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, p.192.

<sup>27</sup> Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, p.18.

<sup>28</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, p.166.

<sup>29</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, p.94.

<sup>30</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, p.95.

<sup>31</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, p.167.

<sup>32</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, p.168.

industrial societies. Liminality is characterised by rituals of both status reversal and elevation, the latter of which takes precedence in this research. Although rituals of status elevation may relate to a collective or community “there is a tendency for them to be performed more frequently for individuals”<sup>33</sup>

Many passage rites are described as irreversible, (for the individual subjects) one-shot-only affairs. Turner argued that life-crisis rituals and initiation rites tend to "put people down"<sup>34</sup> that is, initiates are humbled before being permanently elevated back into structured society through the final phase of incorporation. He further argued that the three phases of this rites of passage schema varied in length for distinct types of rights <sup>35</sup> while van Gennep described discrepancies in his schema as a variance between forms. For the purposes of this visual arts investigation of rites of passage, it makes sense to incorporate ideas of both time and form into a visual art investigation of rites of passage and agree with Turner in his formulation of “symbols as both social and cultural dynamic systems, shedding and gathering meaning over time and altering in form”.<sup>36</sup> In this way, Turner compares a single rite to a work of art in that both share a societal context of emotional and volitional dimensions. The dimensions of comparison for the artist in the production of an artwork include the power to play with and explore unprecedented combinations of familiar elements to make them unfamiliar, to seemingly “turn the social order upside down,”<sup>37</sup> communicating these ideas through various non-verbal symbolic gestures, objects, and materialisms. The potential for the artist then, is to give form to the formlessness of sacred space-time, incorporating both ludic and subversive notions of these elements, which are in turn then shared with society. For Durkheim all rites have some degree of sacredness, and the nature of this sacredness can be found in any object, “a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word anything, can be sacred”.<sup>38</sup> Anthropologist Mary Douglas in her book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (2003) builds on this idea, echoing Turner and Durkheim in that “ambiguous symbols can be used in ritual for the same end as they are used in poetry and mythology, to enrich meaning or to call attention to other levels of existence.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, both

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<sup>33</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, p.167.

<sup>34</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.25.

<sup>35</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.25. For example, Turner also tells us "rites of separation are prominent in funeral ceremonies, rites of incorporation at marriages. Transition rites may play an important part, for instance, in pregnancy, betrothal, and initiation." P.25

<sup>36</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.22.

<sup>37</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.27.

<sup>38</sup> Émile, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, p.35.

<sup>39</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, p.49.

for the artist and the viewer the spatial and temporal dimension of in-between periods found in the liminal phase of a rite of passage are often both experienced and shared.

Metaphorically and poetically, “liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, to an eclipse of the sun or moon”.<sup>40</sup> Placed between hardened and transformed structures, as a visual visceral entity, the essence of the liminal phase functions as a transitional, dynamic, intermediate condition. In the liminal phases of ritual there can be an elimination of social structure in which liminal entities lose their previous social identity and are stripped of their previous social status. This in-between area is one of ambivalence, between the sacred and the profane in which the initiate gains special attributes that are considered both sacred and potentially dangerous. Turner’s view of the danger element is that it is perceived as anarchical and polluting in the context of possible initiatory *communitas*<sup>41</sup> spreading a disorder of thinking and action transferred onto others which is against the maintenance of structured society. This stage of liminal non-status effects personal appearance and habits but also affords “a special kind of freedom, a sacred power of the meek, weak and humble” as threshold people exist outside of and beyond society, considered “untouchable and dangerous”.<sup>42</sup> In this way, I am reminded of the playful and dangerous energy of groups of young adolescents gathering together, which researcher Kira Krenichyn describes in her essay ‘Messages about Adolescent Identity: Coded and Contested Spaces in a New York City High School’ (1999) as a “collective process of identity exploration”<sup>43</sup> that often elicits responses of fear and trepidation from other demographics of society. Mary Douglas further explains pollution in terms of engaging in non-conforming behaviours in which you become dangerous and threatening and invite a “universal feeling of disgust”.<sup>44</sup> She likens it to the ambiguous nature of dirt or “matter out of place”<sup>45</sup> which she reminds us, does not even really exist as “no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification in which it does not fit.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, p.95.

<sup>41</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. *Communitas* denotes a Latin term for ‘Community’ preferred by Turner “to distinguish this modality of social relationship from an “area of common living”” p.96

<sup>42</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, pp.26-27.

<sup>43</sup> Kira Krenichyn, "Messages about Adolescent Identity: Coded and Contested Spaces in a New York City High School," in *Embodied Geographies: Space, Bodies and Rites of Passage* (USA and Canada: Routledge, 1999), p.43.

<sup>44</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, p.xvii.

<sup>45</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, p.50.

<sup>46</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, p.xvii.

Liminality acts as the unsettled middle phase or territory of initiatory rites of passage, in which the individual acquires the experience of becoming completely obscure and detached from reality, but it also exists as a counterpoint to accepted ordered societal structures. In his book *A Secular Age* (2007) philosopher Charles Taylor describes this as the limbo state of liminality when a threshold person is set free from structured society so that imagination, spontaneity, and creativity gives a fresh perspective of power for “seeing and feeling things of great moment”,<sup>47</sup> something denied or limited to structured, coded society. Temporarily unknown and frightening, inducing a state of anxiety and fear, liminality also acts as a passage to unknown growth and potential and denotes a period of preparation necessary to accept a new phase. Having a greater understanding and awareness of the role liminality plays in our journeys of personal discovery means we may be able to better tolerate and negotiate the anxieties associated with this space. Turner defines liminal situations as “seedbeds of cultural creativity” that generate new models, symbols, and paradigms. These in turn feedback into the central social structure “supplying them with goals, aspirations, incentives, structural models and *raison d'être*”.<sup>48</sup> In this way the phase of liminality is situated as a vital moment of creativity, a potential platform for renewing and reenergising the societal makeup concerned with ensuring social and cultural dynamic systems are maintained. Turner sees liminality not only as a form of transition but also of potentiality. He argues it opens-up the possibility of “standing aside not only from one’s own social positions but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements.”<sup>49</sup> It also allows for thinking and feeling through alternative combinations of possibilities that are ludic and free, encompassing “every possible pattern, however weird, that is of the essence of liminality.”<sup>50</sup>

According to both Turner and van Gennep,<sup>51</sup> liminality favours broad interpretations in different disciplinary contexts and stresses in-between situations and conditions, where established structures, hierarchies and authority systems are endangered. Turner also stresses conditions for “the ludic and the experimental”<sup>52</sup> to evolve in the leisure time of current societal structures far more than rites and ceremonies were allowed scope to do in First Nation

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<sup>47</sup> Taylor Charles, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p.50.

<sup>48</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.28.

<sup>49</sup> Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), p.14.

<sup>50</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.28.

<sup>51</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. and van Gennep, *The rites of passage*, 1960.

<sup>52</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.37.

societies. In this way leisure time becomes important, and even sacred to an individual's sense of freedom, "of his growing self-mastery, even self-transcendence."<sup>53</sup> Examining the concept of play in Western thought, Mihai I. Spariosu in *The Wreath of Wild Olive Play: Liminality, and the Study of Literature* (1997) discusses contemporary theories around the unstable but also mutual dependability and complicity of "the margin and centre in Western culture,"<sup>54</sup> and uses examples in literature to explain the liminal character of the margin where "play is the liminal time space par excellence...a threshold or passageway allowing access to alternative worlds,"<sup>55</sup> and he proposes artistic production as another possible alternative way for initiating openings into these sacred or liminal temporary spaces. Along with notions of identity development during adolescence, it is ideas like Spariosu's that I play with in adopting a subjunctive mood of operating with human psychological and social seeds of transition and potentiality towards growth and maturation within crisis rites.

## **Liminal and liminoid**

Turner mostly focused his case studies of the liminal phase of rites on smaller scale African Indigenous communities, and as Spariosu<sup>56</sup> explains, he applied the concept of liminality only metaphorically to current large-scale and complex societies which he believed to be less stable, and repetitive in their societal systems. The term liminoid<sup>57</sup> was adopted by Turner in his essay 'Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology' (1982), to mark a shift in focus towards broadening instances of ritual liminality to include experiences with liminal-type characteristics, appearing in non-ritual settings. Spariosu tells us liminoid phenomena ranged broadly from literature, sporting events, clubs, shopping malls "festivals, processions, pilgrimages, and even revolutions."<sup>58</sup> In post-industrial societies, Turner believed these, and many other varieties of liminoid spaces were brought about by changes to political, technological, and industrial developments which he claimed, "had the cumulative effect of bringing more leisure into the free-time of industrial cultures".<sup>59</sup> Turner's theories were never fully developed and remain exploratory in nature meaning that whether the term liminal or

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<sup>53</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.37.

<sup>54</sup> Mihai Spariosu, *The Wreath of Wild Olive: Play, Liminality, and the Study of Literature* (United States of America: State University of New York press, 1997), p.31.

<sup>55</sup> Spariosu, *The Wreath of Wild Olive: Play, Liminality, and the Study of Literature*, p.32.

<sup>56</sup> Spariosu, *The Wreath of Wild Olive: Play, Liminality, and the Study of Literature*, p.34.

<sup>57</sup> Victor Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology," in *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), pp.20-59.

<sup>58</sup> Spariosu, *The Wreath of Wild Olive: Play, Liminality, and the Study of Literature*, p.34.

<sup>59</sup> Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology," p.39.

liminoid is applied to contemporary rites of passage, they both share the spatial/temporal dimensions of in-betweenness, and as anthropologist Bjørn Thomassen suggests in his book *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between*, (2014) highlight human experiences regarding “the way liminality shaped personality, the sudden foregrounding of agency, and the sometimes dramatic tying together of thought and experience”.<sup>60</sup> For Turner, the main distinctions between the two terms seems to lie in a consideration of the liminal as an obligatory “matter of deep seriousness,”<sup>61</sup> contrasting with the liminoid as a leisure genre and entertainment of “all play and choice.”<sup>62</sup> For the sake of consistency throughout this thesis I adopt the term liminality, which continues to exist as a marginal or in-between phenomena within social processes related to the development of individual and collective questions of self, spirit, nature and soul, while also acknowledging that its uses and applications have and continue to be greatly varied throughout its history as a concept. In setting out to discover some definitively crucial differences in “the structure, function, style, scope and symbology”<sup>63</sup> between liminal and liminoid phenomena, Turner conceded that “in complex, modern societies both types coexist in a sort of cultural pluralism,”<sup>64</sup> and it is this interchangeability of liminal qualities I go along with in capturing the potentiality of moments within passages of adolescence.

## **Rites of passage: anti-structure and flow**

Philosopher Charles Taylor identifies Turner’s idea of structure as “the code of behaviour of a society, in which are defined the different roles and statuses, and their rights, duties, powers, vulnerabilities”.<sup>65</sup> He refers to the ambivalence of Turner’s notion of anti-structure, as the opposite, but also complementary to coded society which together are set in a cosmos where “elements of opposed, or at least unequal values”<sup>66</sup> are allowed moments of free reign. Taylor explains coded society needs time to “let off steam as the code relentlessly applied would drain us of all energy” and periods of anti-structure provide such an outlet.<sup>67</sup> The play between these two registers of society then is an essential counterbalance to the pressure of societal rules and

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<sup>60</sup> Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), p.322.

<sup>61</sup> Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology," p.43.

<sup>62</sup> Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology," p.43.

<sup>63</sup> Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology," p.41.

<sup>64</sup> Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology," p.55.

<sup>65</sup> Charles, *A Secular Age*, p.47. See also Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre the Human Seriousness of Play*, p.28

<sup>66</sup> Charles, *A Secular Age*, p.712.

<sup>67</sup> Charles, *A Secular Age*, p.49.

norms and requires a forced co-existence between structure and anti-structure which is paradoxically complimentary. Taylor makes the point that “the pull to anti-structure can come from beyond the society, and even from beyond humanity”<sup>68</sup> making it a powerful force whose continuing raw energies cannot be underestimated. Within these boundaries of the ‘societal beyond’ lie Turner’s concept of *communitas*, liminal spaces that are activated by the drawing together of individuals that sense that we are all equals, that we belong together. Is it possible then to argue that during this liminal phase of rites of passage, when one is beyond the boundaries of normative society, on the margins, temporarily freed from the confines of societies structures, we are somehow closer to this enchantment of the world of the ancestral, religious or spiritual - to the meaning residing inside of things and to our mammalian constitutions of the archetypal self. As well as such anthropological and ethnographic understandings of anti-structure, it also holds the potential for more subjective applications of artistic fieldwork into ritualistic and improvisational methods of working with objects, the elements, and materials to illicit a depth of poetic and metaphorical responses to rites of passage experiences. As a term it is reflective of the relationship between a mother attentively going along with the affectivities of her adolescent children as they transition from one state to another, when everyday lived experience seems to be in a continuous state of flux, disorientation, and multi-directional passages of anti-structure.

## **Improvising rituals**

In terms of working with the improvisational nature of ritualisation throughout my own work Professor of Religious Studies Ronald Grimes in his book *Endings in Ritual Studies* (2020) offers us a view of ritual as something more creative, experimental, and open to the “bits of inspiration”<sup>69</sup> that seed imaginations, with Grimes’s version accepting and embracing of incessantly disorientating and uncertain epistemic situations congruent with the ordinary, the accidents, mistakes, and variables of everyday life. He implores us to “sin bravely, make real mistakes”<sup>70</sup> when deliberately creating and inventing forms of ritualizing and suggests ritual scholars emphasise the survival value of ritual through acting, practicing, and adapting in response “to an ever-changing universe,”<sup>71</sup> with its multiplicities of pervasive flux. Grimes

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<sup>68</sup> Charles, *A Secular Age*, p.49.

<sup>69</sup> Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies*, p.20.

<sup>70</sup> Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies*, p.23.

<sup>71</sup> Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies*, p.22.

suggests rituals are reshaped and change in response to everything else in a kind of ongoing editing process that accounts for ritual knowledge as collectively and continually reinvented, whereby “we would do a disservice to ritual by imagining it only as an immovable structure, a rock sitting still through the eons.”<sup>72</sup> Instead, he is careful to emphasise its adaptation as both traditional and improvisational, where responding within changing environments is a practiced and emergent skill linked with a democratic sensibility and cultivation of ideas around empathy, generosity, and negotiation that can assist families to “reveal, diagnose, or heal dysfunctional aspects of a family system.”<sup>73</sup>

Grimes maintains that somewhere between continuums of ritual as heavily structured at the top end, or made up and composed at the bottom end, lies the middle with its “other possibilities: rituals with an improvised phase or improvisation used as a way to compose rituals.”<sup>74</sup> In the processual anthropological approach of Edith Turner, one such possibility is discovered through *communitas* where people celebrate unexpected increments of change that bubble up and make conditions of such phenomena through rituals. While ritual is not a precondition of *communitas* for Turner, in her book *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* (2012) she ruminates on the ubiquitous nature of ritual passage as ancestrally given from nature and the spirits and as something rich in “symbolism and detail that has accrued from intuiting the nature of bodily change, both physical and spiritual at once.”<sup>75</sup> The wife and lifelong collaborator of Victor Turner, Edith began to write more from her own experience after her husband’s death. In the preface to one of her earlier books *The Spirit and The Drum: A Memoir of Africa* (1987), she explains her own first-person process as “advocacy anthropology in the female style, that is, speaking on behalf of a culture as a lover or a mother.”<sup>76</sup> She expresses her own mode of coherent story making as a way of “adding my own blood of motherhood, as it were, to feed the embryo so that it might grow in its own true way.”<sup>77</sup> She refers to her first-person experiential writings on ritual, *communitas*, social processes, and liminality as accounts that further illuminate and push beyond her husband’s anthropological work, but in “a more intimate style than in older anthropological writing.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies*, p.17.

<sup>73</sup> Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies*, p.147.

<sup>74</sup> Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies*, p.19.

<sup>75</sup> Edith Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p.165.

<sup>76</sup> Edith Turner, *The Spirit and the Drum A Memoir of Africa* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1987), p.x.

<sup>77</sup> Turner, *The Spirit and the Drum A Memoir of Africa*, p.x.

<sup>78</sup> Edith Turner, *Experiencing Ritual: A New Interpretation of African Healing* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p.16.

Like Edith Turner, I work with events and stories as they arise although my interpretation is also intimately engaged through memory and the ritualisation of making within symbolic, imaginal, and affectively emotional dimensions. I am interested in improvising with and contemporising expressions of both the metaphorical ambiguities of the liminal passage and the ineffable vagrancies of the naturally occurring changes in consciousness and expansion that seed and grow there. Glimpses into the mysteries of these experiential connections are activated through my own sense of Edith Turner's blood of mothering adolescent passages where, as she tells us through her anthropological approach to findings of human and soul permeability, there is a flow and flexibility between self and others, and spiritual and material dimensions are allowed into each other as one.<sup>79</sup>

### **Subjunctive mothering**

In the essay 'Woman/women in "the Discourse of Man": Edie and Victor Turner's Language of the Feminine' (2008) Professor of Cultural Studies, Barbara A. Babcock credits Edith as being "the subjunctive mother of the work, obviously contributing to the putting of woman into discourse...in which *Mother* is omnipresent as both subject and verb."<sup>80</sup> Babcock describes her work as writing anthropology through a knowledge of the whole self and making an individual contribution to anthropological experience in which "she is all too aware of her own and other female subjectivities and knows without high theory that the maternal body is the ground of all representations, and that women's stories are inseparable from women's bodies."<sup>81</sup> An embodied sensibility of mothering mind, gut and heart reflexivity is experientially knotted within my children's adolescent stories of crisis passages and their conditions of liminal antistructure, where the ludic becomes a generative register of creative possibilities derived from the potent potentiality inside this middle phase.

A relational dynamism of change between the normative practice of ordinary life with its inductive mood and forced interstitial spaces of ritual antistructure with their more subjunctive mood, belong to the Turners' collaboration into theories of processual cultural and social life, where providing necessary "homes for anti-structural visions, thoughts, and ultimately

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<sup>79</sup> Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* p.218.

<sup>80</sup> Barbara A Babcock, "Woman/women in "the Discourse of Man": Edie Turner and Victor Turner's Language of the Feminine," in *Victor Turner and contemporary cultural performance*, ed. Graham St John (United States: Berghahn Books, 2008), p.302.

<sup>81</sup> Babcock, "Woman/women in "the Discourse of Man": Edie Turner and Victor Turner's Language of the Feminine," p.302.

behaviours,”<sup>82</sup> addresses their necessity and constant interplay as ruptures towards transformational reinvention and renewal. Adopting a mood of subjunctive mothering, my practice explores the interplay of creative and innovative possibilities of ordinary daily life, and the characteristics of antistructure in liminal transformative spaces. To borrow quantum physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad’s term, there is a sense in these spaces of intimate “intra-action” as an ongoing “differentiating of the world,”<sup>83</sup> making it difficult to disentangle where one space ends and the other might begin. The boundaries become blurred and ambiguous, mingling, and informing each other rather than existing as two distinct dichotomous spaces. Barad’s neologism intra-action is evoked through a process of attuned familial and mothering relations.

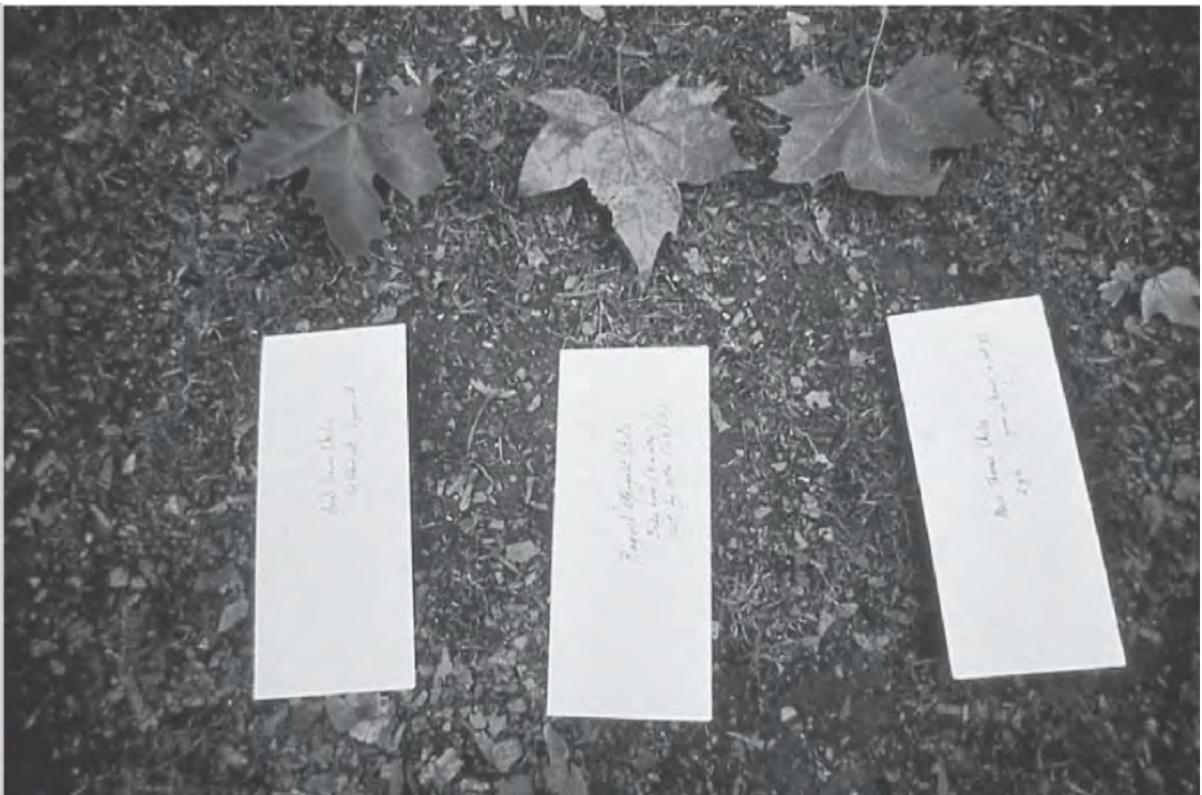


Figure 7: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Childrens Piece: Time Stop* (detail) *Tree Droppings – Leaving Home of the Leaves: Part of Fall Time Variations III* 1974, Performed at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York, © Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, 2009, University of Minnesota Press, p.64

<sup>82</sup> Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, p.293.

<sup>83</sup> Karan Barad, "Intra-actions," interview by Adam Kleinman, 2012, p.80, [https://www.academia.edu/1857617/\\_Intra-actions\\_Interview\\_of\\_Karen\\_Barad\\_by\\_Adam\\_Kleinmann\\_](https://www.academia.edu/1857617/_Intra-actions_Interview_of_Karen_Barad_by_Adam_Kleinmann_).

In her book *Feminist Art and The Maternal* (2009) art historian Andrea Liss outlines some of the earlier and lesser-known works of Miele Laderman Ukele's *Maintenance Art Projects* which seem to fall into the middle of Grimes's ritualizing continuum of remaining responsive to actions of an empathetic improvisational dynamic as a foundation of their production. Liss suggests these works are "intimately conceived" and deal with issues of "maternal labour" which focuses on "the work after the children are born",<sup>84</sup> and thus, serving as a background to Ukele's future public art projects for which she is well known. Ukele's *Fall Time Variations III, Children's piece: Time Stop (Tree Droppings-The Leaving Home of Leaves)* (1974), was the last section of a ritualistic performance event in three parts. It included a 100-year-old oak tree, fallen leaves of different hues and snippets of hair from her three children, along with organic materials, envelops, spoken incantations of her children's names and written instructions. According to Liss, these works combined in a ritualistic, "quasi-religious ceremony merging death rites with the promise of the future" describing maternal issues in the work which relate to "acceptance that children are individual human beings both connected to and distinct from their mothers".<sup>85</sup>

The use of everyday materials both archival and found/collected is something I connect with in my work and in relation to my own children. There is something about the ritualised enactment of the piece that relates to Turner's vital importance for connection with cosmological systems during liminal periods when the initiates are described as "dead to the social world but alive to the asocial world,"<sup>86</sup> and in close connection with powers of life and death. "The Death Instinct" and "The Life Instinct" is also evident in Ukele's *Maintenance Art Manifesto* from 1969. Originally written as a rebuttal and healing tool in relation to the patriarchal artworld of the 1960s and 1970s the manifesto declared:

## I. IDEAS

### A. The Death Instinct and the Life Instinct:

The Death Instinct: separation; individuality; Avant-Garde par excellence; to follow one's own path to death—do your own thing; dynamic change.

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<sup>84</sup> A Liss, *Feminist art and the maternal* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 48.

<sup>85</sup> Liss, *Feminist art and the maternal*, 64-65.

<sup>86</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.27.

The Life Instinct: unification; the eternal return; the perpetuation and MAINTENANCE of the species; survival systems and operations; equilibrium.<sup>87</sup>

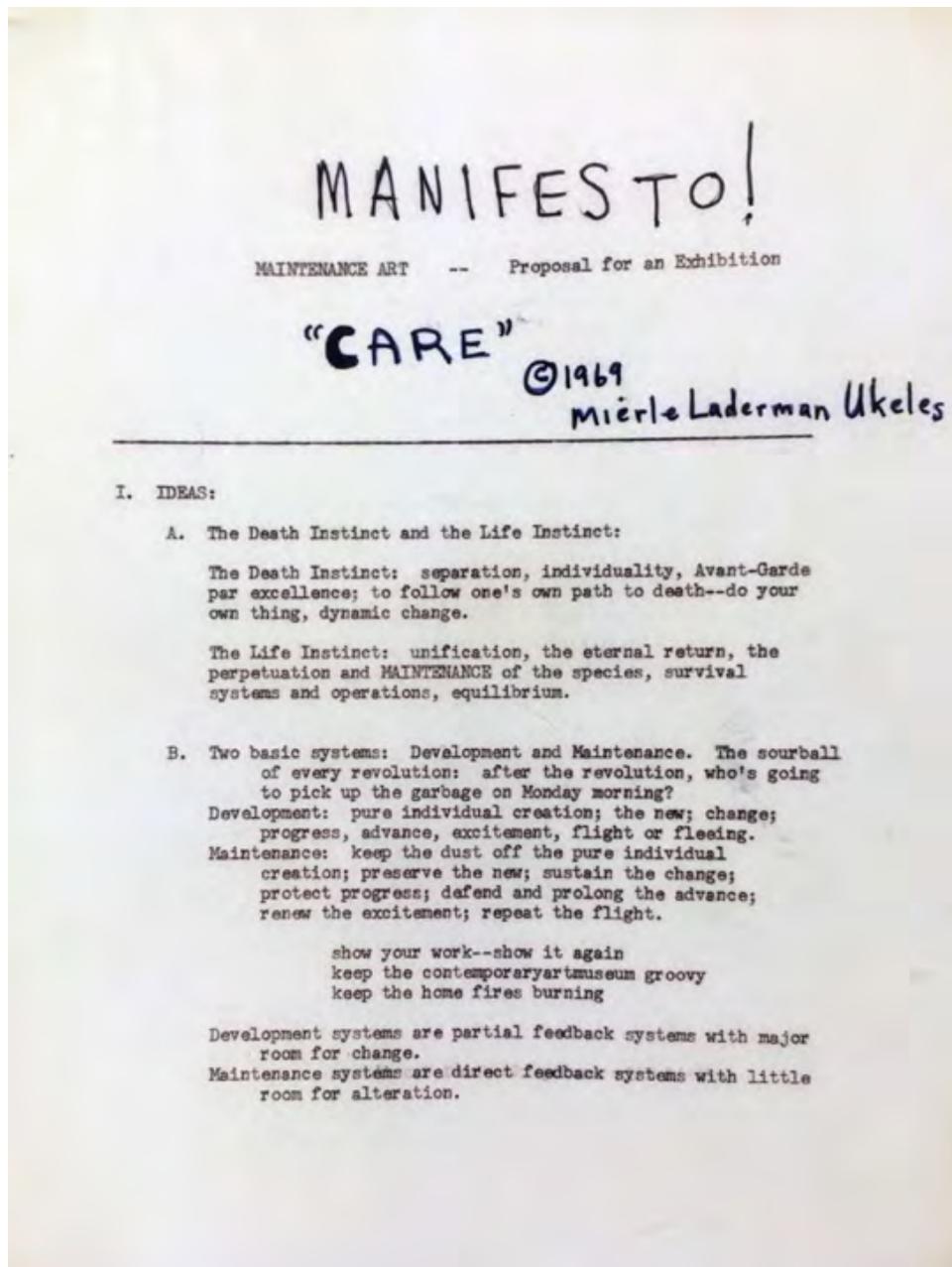


Figure 8: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art! Proposal for an exhibition, "Care,"* (partial text page 1 of 4) 1969 in Patricia C. Phillips, *Mierle Laderman Ukeles*, New York: Queens Museum, 2016 (Exhibition Catalogue), Prestel Publishing, p.42

<sup>87</sup> Patricia C. Finkelppearl Phillips, Tom. Harris, Larissa. , ed., *Mierle Laderman Ukeles* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2016), p.42. Ladermans original text copied from this Queens Museum, Exhibition Catalogue

Ukeles' words correspond with the metaphorical death of the old and birth of the new in the liminal passage described by Turner, and van Gennep, where the middle phase of marginal consciousness is pregnant with potential for renewing and reinvigorating not only the individual but through them also the larger societal makeup. In an interview conducted by Liss in 2000, Ukeles recounts a pivotal incident that led to the writing of the manifesto when as a pregnant young artist, a respected male mentor commented on her condition with "well, Mierle, I guess you know you can't be an artist now".<sup>88</sup> This anecdote left me wondering if all female artists, at some stage in their studies or career, experience something similar. Throughout my undergraduate studies I either had a baby with me on the floor of a drawing class or was pregnant with baby number two, but it wasn't until my final graduate year, a male mentor whom I also greatly respected quipped that I should try to be a little less clever and crafty. This is a comment I have taken years to puzzle through and it's an element that still seems to be self-evident in my practice today despite the constant internal dialogue it has generated. Although not directly related to the care of mothering as Ukele's experience was, this comment seems now to me directed at women's work generally as something outside of the realm of the patriarchal realm of so called high or fine art.

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<sup>88</sup> Liss, *Feminist art and the maternal*, 51.

## Intersubjective adolescent passages

It has been difficult to locate artwork that deals with adolescent rites of passage through the lens of the emphatic attentive mother, however the work of Australian photographer Tamara Dean's multi-sensory installation *Stream of Consciousness* (2018) aims to recall the ambiguous transformative phase of a rite from her own perspective.



Figure 9: Tamara Dean, *Stream of Consciousness* (image still from installation) 2018, Australian Cultural Fund, <https://australianculturalfund.org.au/projects/stream-of-consciousness/>

Deans work consists of a darkened room with a pool of water in the centre of the space, where an image subtly and mysteriously resolves before the viewer's eyes; the water being representative of purification rites and the transient nature of youth and time. There is a psychological darkness to the space, the sense of something moving or trying to transition into the light and a tension that requires a navigation that borders on trepidation or fear. The subtle sounds and smells of the space are at once present but also leave you questioning their function while searching for the visual equivalent of their meaning. When viewing this work at the Adelaide Biennial of Australia 2018, I accidentally stepped in the pool of water on the floor in

the centre of the dimly lit room as I was so busy searching for the source of titillation for the other senses. It was through the ripples made by my foot that the fragmented image reflected from somewhere in the darkness above slowly became visible in the water and then stilled. A figure curled up in a somersault position, frozen in time and suspended forever between darkness and light confronted me. In an interview with *Art Guide Australia* 2018, Dean says of her work:

In terms of stages in life, that time in youth where independence is being forged is particularly potent. It's most often the first time where you are entirely responsible for your own safety, and also the consequences of your choices. It's a time where you can discover who you are apart from your family unit. There is a sense of freedom and of feeling invincible that comes with this age that can become dulled as we move into later stages of life where there are more responsibilities.<sup>89</sup>

Throughout her photographs, Dean sets up situations in which she captures some aspect of young people when they are in their own awkward happy/unhappy worlds. Characteristics of these worlds can be viewed as a universally shared experience and Dean aims to capture this universality in many of her still images. The transitional and strange aspect of her work quite often involves portraits of adolescents at play in their worlds in both body and mind, which is a point of departure from my own concerns in exploring and conveying these spaces beyond portraiture, through objects performance and ritualised processes of making. I have decided to occupy and highlight a position of midlife-mothering by attending and attuning to these transitional spaces of rites of adolescent passage. Unlike Dean's more universal vantage point mine is an inner intersubjective position which manifests itself through the materiality of different shapes and symbols, reflective of the unique and shared experiences of familial individuals as they emerge and eventuate.

In the book *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third* (2018) psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin "defines intersubjectivity in terms of a relationship of mutual recognition—a relation in which each person experiences the other as a 'like subject,' another mind who can be 'felt with' yet has a distinct, separate centre of feeling and

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<sup>89</sup> "Interview with Tamara Dean," *Art Guide Australia*, 2019, <https://artguide.com.au/interview-tamara-dean>.

perception.”<sup>90</sup> Benjamin writes of this phenomenologically felt experience in relational psyches as both reciprocal and mutually attuning; a confusing two-directionality of recognition and acknowledgement that we manage to grasp from an intersubjective position of shared thirdness.<sup>91</sup> Characteristic of this third is an acknowledgement in the form of atonement for the disruptions to recognition which surrender refers us to, the difficulty lying in not attempting to control but rather “being able to sustain connectedness to the other’s mind while accepting his separateness and difference.”<sup>92</sup> This mutuality of care and recognition within such forms of subject centred surrender requires we let go of the self and create space; an in-between, where the intersubjective dynamic of the two-person relationship works on the level of procedural interaction not done to, through coercion, but doing with, going along with and coalescing.

Borrowing from the challenges and strengths towards independence learnt through my own rites of passage experience I see ritualised spaces becoming less frequent and recognisable within current Westernised societal structures and search for them instead within a common substance between adolescence and mothering. In attending to this sense of lack in societal forms of ritualisation for my adolescent children artistic explorations develop around the transformational possibilities of the objects they have practiced and played with, and which my mothering compulsion has collected and held onto believing these objects to be imbued with resonances and residues of each of their unique and idiosyncratic journey’s. Working with processes that respond to rites of passage rituals, with a particular adherence to the liminal qualities and temporalities of the creatively ambiguous period of antistructure, the work takes on a symbolic, sacred power with quasi-religious and cosmological connotations assisting me as an artist/mother, and my children, as the rite of passage initiates, in contributing to understandings of the significance of journey and transition and its potential capacity for a mutuality of meaning making in everyday life.

In the formation of this work I have looked to memory, everyday household objects and activities of engagement with events of my adolescent children. From a mothering perspective, mementos of growth and nostalgia are worked with as sentimental reminders for the softening of time and a sense of loss to a previous mothering role. This is not a thesis grounded in and

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<sup>90</sup> Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third*, p.22.

<sup>91</sup> Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third*, p.23.

<sup>92</sup> Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third*, p.24.

about the history of art but is instead an interdisciplinary project delving onto dimensions of human development around the concerns of the psyche, the spiritual and sacred. This research addresses the gap I have identified at the juncture of adolescence, midlife mothering, and rites of passage experiences. In the chapters that follow, I will explore and experiment with it not only through improvisational processes of making but also through theories and concerns relating to fields of anthropology, psychology, alchemical and ritual studies.

## Chapter 1: The Car

This chapter explores the first car as a potentially symbolic marker of passage and meaning making in the lives of adolescent children as they move through a transitional state from child to adulthood. Although first getting a licence is often paid lip service as a rite of passage in contemporary culture, it has become so heavily regulated that much of the joy of the event is surpassed by the governance that surrounds it. From a mothering perspective this makes it an occurrence that feels more shrouded in layers of dread and fear than a celebration of freedom and empowerment towards adulthood. Within the car body we situate our own bodies, and in the case of our first car often spend inordinate amounts of time gathering experiences and making stories rich with both potential hazards and possibilities. The first car is paradoxically a site of freedom and danger with both these states existing as intrinsically interwoven imperatives of the objects use and existence. I experiment with my adolescent child's first car as the shell or enclosure of an experience that can hold metaphorically and is also capable of holding up physically, transforming it through processes of casting and wrapping as I go along with the drama of events unfolding and developing around the vehicle in real time.

When life meets art there exists the potential for a collision of memory and the present moment co-mingling in a strangely poetic temporal zone of experience and making. Anthropologist Tim Ingold in his book *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (2013) explains "the art of inquiry" as a going along with materials so that knowledge can grow out of practical engagement with things, trying them out in "real time, along with the lives of those who are touched by it, and with the world to which both it and they belong."<sup>93</sup> What goes on in the studio becomes an embodied affective source of creation in which I am engaging ritualised modes of making in joining with the flux of material processes and the events that inspire them. Ingold describes this as a process of actively following along and "knowing from the inside" that is derived from growing with and paying attention to the wisdoms of practical tasks and the learning that comes from feeling forward with them.<sup>94</sup>

Oscar Wilde professed in his essay 'The Decay of Lying' (1881) that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life"<sup>95</sup> which I feel is an apt way of translating, by means of artistic

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<sup>93</sup> Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, pp.6-7.

<sup>94</sup> Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, p.1.

<sup>95</sup> Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," in *Intentions* (London: Leipzig Heinemann and Balestier, 1891), p.26, 32, 44.

conventions these imagistic instincts of shared liminal behaviours, situations and structures found within a rite of passage. In accordance with this quote Wilde proclaimed life with the self-conscious aim of finding expression through art “that Art offers it [life] certain beautiful forms through which it may realise that energy”.<sup>96</sup> Such energy becomes wrapped up within emerging sculptural processes at play in work commenced on my adolescent sons first car. It feels like a race with myself to get his car wrapped before he got his licence as this would mark the end of my time with the possibilities of artistic convention and transformation of the object and make the urgency in processes of making seem so close to the lived experience of their production, almost willed into existence under their own forces. It is as if I feel and tend to the flow of a materiality unfolding in a kind of work of the moment affected by real time unfolding events.



Figure 10: Work in Progress: Wrapping Car on the Hoist, April - June 2019, image by Kerryn Sylvia.

Up on the hoist in the shed the car stayed for six weeks as the packing tape made its way around its contours and slowly built up enough strength as a cast that could hold the new potential lightness of its own structure. The physical and performative act became a daily ritual

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<sup>96</sup> Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," pp.44-45.

of making and process in which I meditated on the meaning and symbolism of a first car and its place in contemporary youth culture. Obtaining a first car and the licence to drive it is both as a societal rite of passage but also a source of intense anxiety for a mother dealing with all the freedom and fears statistics tell us the object represents. While the first car acts as an externalising system of passage for adolescence, through the process of wrapping I was also experiencing it as something intimate and internal, as if I could soften its hard exterior into something less solid, more delicate yet still able to hold; to act as a type of metaphorical adolescent cocoon in which to nurture transformational possibilities.

To serve this function it did not need to be complete, it should be able to find its own shape, to fold and fall as it wished, free from perfection or any sense of wholeness and finality. It should remain part of an ongoing process and reflect the societal anti-structural state of liminality within a rite of passage. I desired it to stay in sympathy with the disruptive nature of this adolescent liminal state of becoming and formlessness, outside of society, on the margins in both a physical and psychological sense. In this way the car presents itself as an affective experimentation, an expressive action of immersion in some temporal cadence of becoming as experiences unfold. The wrapping acts like a caress, a cocooning, tempered with an awareness in the futility of protecting and attempting to hold. Through the actions of making this object I am reminded of the reality of my mothering job, in contemplating letting go and thinking of myself outside of the confines and comforts of my practiced motherly body.

As mother to the rites of passage experiences of adolescent children, I am made aware of my own unmediated presence through many elements at play in the work. There is a process of slow formation going on in the studio. The object of my making is passing through stages or passages of growth and transformation concurrently with the real-life events going on in our daily lives. Professor Tim Ingold in his online lecture '100 Day Studio: Tim Ingold - Making Growing Thinking' (2020) describes this as "making in growing"<sup>97</sup> which proposes a "thinking that joins with the world"<sup>98</sup> and feels as if many little forces or thresholds are gathering outside of time so that pure thinking with the processes of the moment can emerge. Signs of the slow temporal register in the development of the sculpture are everywhere. Ingold refers to this as an opening up to the discovery of the form that seems to want to grow on its

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<sup>97</sup> Tim Ingold, "100 Day Studio: Tim Ingold - Making Growing Thinking," in *100 Day Studio*, ed. Architecture Foundation (United Kingdom: Architecture Foundation 2020). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FptmjWzj6Vw>

<sup>98</sup> Ingold, "100 Day Studio: Tim Ingold - Making Growing Thinking."

own, where your own role as the maker becomes one like “imitating the weather”,<sup>99</sup> and where the transition or transformation occurs as if of its own accord, without the imposition of force. Where all you are required to do is go along with it as it makes its way into existence. As I work on the next layer of its treatment the sculpture seems to be holding up and looking quite unexpectedly ‘car-like’, but I do not carry expectations or ambitions that this current form will last and look forward to it finding its own incarnation of becoming or ontogenesis.

The title for the sculptural work *Car Cocoon: Love and Other Collisions #II* (2020-2022) also comes to light throughout the process of making, titled after an earlier exploration into my family’s connection to car culture. Exhibited as part of the Whitecube project, an artist- run initiative that ran locally in Sunraysia from 2010 – 2016, *Love and Other Collisions #1* (2011) was a small sculpturally photographic work of double-sided analogue and digital prints piled and sliced together into a repetitious cluster of angles and viewpoints of my dad’s first muscle-car, a GT falcon. Australian car culture and speedway of all forms has always been an inescapably strong presence in my upbringing and continues also into my current family narrative. My artist statement for *Love and Other Collisions #I* (2011) read:

This work references the yellow GT falcon my parents brought off the showroom floor in 1974. The significance of a new car can be lasting and in relation to my own family dynamics this car remains symbolic and continues to unite and divide in the quest for understanding about love and the strong ties of blood, however fractured they might become over time. I can still recall the taste and smell of the vinyl trims of the front seats I chewed on as a four-year-old on the way home in the back of that brand new car, leaving my mark indelibly on the vehicles surface to this day, an action my father has never quite forgotten either.

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<sup>99</sup> Ingold, "100 Day Studio: Tim Ingold - Making Growing Thinking."



Figure 11: Kerry Sylvia, *Love and Other Collisions #1* 2011, analogue and digital photographs, formica, perspex box, plinth

In the studio, working on the full-size cast of the car body evidence of time is also infused within the layers of materials used in the sculpture's formation. A closer look at the surface reveals strands of hair from my actions of crawling inside, outside, over and under the work along with bugs and insects that have embedded themselves between layers of tape across months, enticed by the stickiness and luminous whiteness of the object. Red dust and dirt have also found their way through the cracks and crevices of the studio during the multitude of dust storms throughout the year and is a regular feature of the northwest Victorian mallee landscape. Organic matter has insinuated and impregnated itself on and into any exposed sites of stickiness creating subtle lines of colour and contours that act as a form of mapping across the object's surface.



Figure 12: Kerry Sylvia, *Car Cocoon: Love and Other Collisions #II* 2020-2022, process of making (within)

These indicators intertwine with what Ingold describes as “the contrary forces of friction and tension that actually hold the object”,<sup>100</sup> which in the cars case consists of the molecular van der Waals forces<sup>101</sup> of packing tape and a coherence of glue molecules that form a textured weave or mesh. These are types of joins that both conditionally adhere and cohere. In which Ingold tells us “Adherence is about spatial propinquity; coherence is about temporal longevity. Coherence is about why things take time to make, why they last and why they eventually fall apart. So, with coherence time enters constitutively into the formation of the work.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Ingold, "100 Day Studio: Tim Ingold - Making Growing Thinking."

<sup>101</sup> In schools of material science the term refers to a dispersion of intermolecular bonding forces that was named after Dutch scientist Johannes Diderik van der Waals in 1873, "Van der Waals forces," Encyclopædia Britannica 2016, accessed December 27, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/science/van-der-Waals-forces>.

<sup>102</sup> Ingold, "100 Day Studio: Tim Ingold - Making Growing Thinking."



Figure 13: Kerryn Sylvia, *Car Cocoon: Love and Other Collisions #II*, (detail of gluing coherence) 2020

During the time the sculptural car frontend has sat in two halves in the studio I have continued tending to it carefully, cleaning and vacuuming it periodically, an experience like the daily maintenance of raising young children and the housework that goes with it. Something was stopping me from putting it together and I just couldn't move forward with the process. I seemed to be waiting, lovingly attentive but waiting for something to happen...and then something did.



Figure 14: Kerryn Sylvia: *Crash Zone Aftermath #I* 2020



Figure 15: Kerryn Sylvia: *Crash Zone Aftermath #II* 2020

### ***Mother Mantra - thoughts on a car***

*So, the car is gone...long live the car...and in my chest is that constricting bind of physically felt mother knots. I'm not sure how long it will rest there before I can breathe normally again but a car crash for your teenage child feels like an inevitability.*

### ***Mother guilt***

*Problematic risky behaviours, road injuries, fatalities, the media messages that ring in my head like a mantra. None of the above at least. Everyone is walking away from the experience intact.*

### ***Mother guilt***

*I could not and still have not treated it to more change. It hangs in a state of suspended animation in the studio, holding its breath, awaiting further transformation. I too have been waiting for a sign, for the force of its materiality to push me into action.*

### ***Mother guilt***

*Beyond the initial shaping, wrapping, and racing time before the real car disappeared with the getting of the licence, something stopped me*

*from working on it. It felt like holding my breath...waiting for something. Now only a trace of the original remains, the chaos of the event has destroyed the reality of it and its destruction feels like permission to begin anew.*

### ***Mother guilt***

*Youth creature, a transparent and shimmering apparition. It has stayed between states now for the past eleven months and three weeks. Every now and then I tend to it, vacuum the dust away, wipe away the cobwebs and cut out insects and bugs that have found their way between layers of tape. Gravitating to it in a loving, nurturing, and caring way until the becoming of desire and driving force towards the next part of the process.*

### ***Mother guilt***

*Now the accident has occurred, the car is a write-off, I am left with an irrational nagging feeling for being in some way responsible for the accident. Affectionately...*

### ***Mother guilt***

*Somehow my own worry and anxiousness over this very thing happening has contributed to the incident. Something in the world has forced me to think, has forced this encounter into existence. The evidence of this feeling hangs in mid process, in two halves... confronting me.*

### ***Mother guilt***

*Somehow, I am ready to stop tending to it, preserving it, it is ready to move along in the process of transformation. The encounter has passed, the object moves from dirty and dangerous to an object of nostalgia. I am sentimental towards it as another symbol of adolescent rites of passage.*

### ***Mother guilt***

*Spectre like, a phantom, cocoon, or coffin. Cocoon is better, cocoon was what I was referring to all along as the latter is beyond comprehension. Not long now before they are fully automated.*

### ***Mother guilt***

*Presence, absence, within, without, memories of Linea nigra, of love.*

### ***Mother guilt***

The process begins anew, the two halves becoming one, the join between the two sides of the car revealing itself, creating an urge to cover it up as an imperfection but I do not. Something about it grows within me, from memory, from the embodiment of pregnancy two decades or more ago now. It feels like such a long time but also somehow like no time at all, fainter now but a resonance. Along with the transformation of the object from hard and solid to something softer and inherently fragile, the joining line becomes the Linea nigra, the pregnancy line of hyperpigmentation running from the public area to belly button, stirring a faint memory in of my body growing during pregnancy.

With this line I am reminded that I am nowhere present in this work, but everywhere at the same time, a concept reminiscent of Mahayana Buddhist notions of identity and self-awareness. Just as I have given birth with my own body, I have also taken birth in another body and become part of the process in the ubiquitous cycle of life. Through this line the entanglements of our intersubjective experiences of mother and child are shared both across generations and within our more immediate everyday correspondence of experiences.



Figure 16: *Car Cocoon: Love and Other Collisions #II*, work in progress with Linea nigra line illuminated 2020, image by Kerry Sylvia

### *Inside the car body: interlude*

Walking in the dark night is a way to practice faith, a way to build confidence in the unknown.... I learn to practice courage in the vastness of what I can't see. **Stephanie Kaza**<sup>103</sup>

*I return to here to an almost forgotten part in my own rite of passage story that the production of the car cocoon has procured from the depths of adolescent memory in the chill of the winter's night.*

*Cast between worlds, that of child and adulthood, I cannot recall one single song that was playing in the strangers' car I got into for the*

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<sup>103</sup> June. Cotner, *Looking for God in all the right places: prayers and poems to comfort, inspire, and connect humanity* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2004), p.64.

*ride home or even if there was a radio or music playing at all. While the music of my parent's car is still palpable, (I can hear it playing in my ear even now), within the confines of this unfamiliar environment I was on high alert; my mind and body alive and engaged in the depths of the moment of that experience. There was a drive towards uncertainty in the unknown that called and everything else exterior to my own internal heartbeat and bodily sense of self have been obscured. Far from anything externally visible or audible, what does take over is the bodily sensations of the car on the ride home. A body within a body, a rumble of the engine and acute awareness of it vibrating through me, divining a heightened state of alertness, on guard, unsure but curious, actively attentive but different from how I felt when I was outside waiting. In the cool night air on the side of the road I seemed to be stuck between worlds, every little sight, sound, and breeze across my face accented, fully present and felt. It was a feeling of being attentive to the moment and feeling outside any sense of self (maybe even beyond self) than I had ever had before. The anticipation in my body building with its own somatic resonances and prickling with an aliveness of something immense and much greater than myself.*

Thinking back on my own rite of passage experience there is something barely perceptible about the change that occurred on that evening and settled into my very bones. The car features heavily in my own story, casting me into a liminal space, betwixt and between and outside of the ordered and structured world of my existence up until that moment. In leaving my parents car, its familiarity, warmth, and safety, I had a sense of becoming with the darkness and unknown. Into the cool night air, my body hairs prickling and standing on end with energy, uncertainty, and excitement of the experience. Between worlds and between cars, having to decide to enter the car of the other, to take that risk and enter its interior, its unfamiliarity. I believed that everything would be alright, I just needed to simply do, to trust in myself and whatever the universe had in store for this experience.

## Holding and held

The work of depth psychologist Matt Licata in his book *A Healing space: Befriending Ourselves in Difficult Times* (2020) refers to Jung's ideas of archetypes as transgenerational experiences that we tune into as a felt recognition of greater presence supporting and holding us through uncertain times. As Licata explains:

When we are able to 'hold' our experience as well as allow ourselves to 'be held' by something larger than our personal sense of self, we learn to trust ourselves and the workability of our lives, even in the midst of uncertainty. We become more spontaneous and creative, more flexible, and better able to respond to the challenges life will inevitably provide.<sup>104</sup>

This greater holding space of presence is an evocative, embodied, felt recognition, a force or felt sense of some other energy or existence within the intersection of our own subjectivities and unconscious. It gives us a sense of being contained in something vast, to touch a dimension of our deeper self or psyche which in Western societies we label with many names such as God, spirit, or soul.

Licata suggests that a phenomenological perspective of otherness relates to a realm of experience that feels transpersonal, that's found at an intersection of spirit and matter; an alchemical area of imagination that resides inside all of us. This manifests within liminal in-between encounters of life which are not quite physical or spiritual. Attuning to these deeper energies of friendship experience that are available, whether inside, outside or in some great eternal third realm, requires a more conscious embodied alchemical experience with our own lives, even within difficult and unwanted passages. Licata writes we relate "to these alchemical images *symbolically*, not literally, as metaphors for the transformation of stuck internal experience such as difficult emotions, fixed core beliefs about ourselves and others"<sup>105</sup> and inviting these situations for meaning to disclose itself.

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<sup>104</sup> Matt. Licata, *A Healing Space: Befriending Ourselves in Difficult Times* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2020), p.37.

<sup>105</sup> Licata, *A Healing Space: Befriending Ourselves in Difficult Times*, p.38.

Potter and poet Mary Caroline Richards in her book *The Crossing Point: Selected Talks and Writings* (1973) also writes of the inner drama of the nonspatial realm across all disciplines of study and research in which “we are capable of developing an objective psyche and intuition for these inward planes of feeling from the inside made available to the imagination.”<sup>106</sup> Through her poetic forms of questioning moving beyond transformational processes employed by medieval alchemists, she cites an Einsteinian projective new geometry that “accommodates a nonspatial realm in which living energies play invisibly to produce visible bodies and behaviour. Inner sculptors at the growing tips of our manhood.”<sup>107</sup>

It is through alchemical and poetic musings of those such as Licata, Richards, and others<sup>108</sup> that I feel for glimpses of ongoing processes and metaphysical ideas of becoming and identity formation within the liminal passages of my adolescent children. Richards states, “I feel very connected with the alchemical tradition, through the arts, particularly clay and the art of the fire and the transformations of person and of society.”<sup>109</sup> Similarly in my own work I am attentive to and waiting for the rhythms of meaning within our intermingling of life processes and the liminal inner realm to unfold.

Licata’s ideas build on Tibetan Mahayana traditions that speak of a quality of wisdom found inside negative emotions.<sup>110</sup> Through opening ourselves up to the ambiguities of crisis and uncertainty we learn to care for and love them through a heart practice of empathy and acceptance rather than just wanting relief or striving to get over crises as quickly as possible. It is Licata’s belief that becoming curious about the unknown facilitates a dialogue and journey through the body, mind, and dreamworld, to discover a type of wisdom that cannot be found in moments of clarity or peace and that transformations “are in large part discovered in the unknown—in those unfamiliar voices, thoughts, feelings, and images that dwell deeper in the soul, in those realms of experience.”<sup>111</sup> These forces of endurance and resilience build within us by staying with the symptoms of emotional challenges and periods of uncertainty. Struggling with negative emotions means we must be willing to meet that experience in new ways, to work with the limbic brain to forge new neurocircuitry pathways that come from both

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<sup>106</sup> Mary Caroline Richards, *The Crossing Point Selected Talks and Writings* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1973), p.61.

<sup>107</sup> Richards, *The Crossing Point Selected Talks and Writings*, p.60.

<sup>108</sup> This is also the magical language of alchemy that has stayed with me since first reading James Elkins *What Painting Is* by, (Routledge New York, 2000)

<sup>109</sup> Richards, *The Crossing Point Selected Talks and Writings*, p.180.

<sup>110</sup> Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (Australia: Random House, 2002), p.78-79.

<sup>111</sup> Licata, *A Healing Space: Befriending Ourselves in Difficult Times*, p.17.

deep within ourselves and through other sources of knowledge that are transgenerational, adaptive, and intelligent.

Licata explains the “alchemical middle place in which new circuitry can take birth and bloom”<sup>112</sup> as a paradox of liminal in-between experiences that contain both struggle and possibilities. Its richness lies in staying with the embodied sensations of experience and the uncertainties of not knowing and being curious enough to really feel where and how they might reveal themselves. In an interview with multimedia publisher Tami Simon, Licata (2020) employs the metaphor of “yellowing,”<sup>113</sup> an alchemical process used to poetically describe what it means to be in the dissolved place of liminality, in-between the death of something that we will not return to and the birth or rebirth of something that we cannot yet see. He shares in Victor Turner’s analogy of a “liminal womb”<sup>114</sup> which makes room for the darkness where real transformation can grow, where what we have felt and thought we knew is dissolving and requires a humility of surrender to any notions of fixity that we imagined for ourselves and our life course. This is not an easy place to dwell - open, sensitive, and alive to our relationality. According to Licata it is where the work of befriending and connecting with an ecology of self within the world takes place. On a deeper level a sense of “being held by transpersonal figures, energies, and the natural world itself,”<sup>115</sup> is a way of sticking with liminal states of uncertainty and vulnerability while also allowing for the curiosity and creative potential of play within the taboos of adolescence, inclusive of those on the darker side or at the margins of what is socially acceptable.

The idea of holding or being held comes from psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott’s observations in the 1960s. In her book *Donald W. Winnicott: A New Approach* (2008), psychoanalyst Laura Dethiville discusses both the physical and psychic connotations of Winnicott’s concept of holding during infancy that comes from experiences of the “good enough mother.”<sup>116</sup> At stake in these relational holding environments are the physiological and psychological needs of the infant, essential for progressive development of a sense of identity.<sup>117</sup> Adopting Winnicott’s concept of being good enough in the mothering role is a way of working through the worry,

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<sup>112</sup> Licata, *A Healing Space: Befriending Ourselves in Difficult Times*, p.63.

<sup>113</sup> Matt Licata, *The Alchemy of Befriending Ourselves in Difficult Times*, podcast audio, Insights at the Edge, 01:07:032020, <https://resources.soundstrue.com/podcast/matt-licata-phd-the-alchemy-of-befriending-ourselves-in-difficult-times/>.

<sup>114</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, p.95.

<sup>115</sup> Licata, *A Healing Space: Befriending Ourselves in Difficult Times*, p.37.

<sup>116</sup> Laura Dethiville, *Donald W. Winnicott : A New Approach*, ed. Susan Ganley Lévy (London : Karnac, 2014), p.6.

<sup>117</sup> Dethiville, *Donald W. Winnicott : A New Approach*, p.52.

guilt and potential for other motherly inadequacies that the expanding field of contemporary mothering theory reveals. Within these empathic gestures of holding Dethiville, following Winnicott, explains that the very early motherly actions of spontaneous care allow “the infant to define markers by which his capacity to wait (and therefore begin to think) can be put in place. This means time, repetition, constancy, and the endless monotony of the same thing.”<sup>118</sup> What we remember of this time is only within any ruptures or changes to the routine itself. In the book *The Mother Knot* (1987) author Jane Lazarre speaks to this ambiguous sense of timing where memory knits together occasional moments of enjoyment and excitement in watching a child grow as “the illusion of long, unified periods of time gathered together as one mass,”<sup>119</sup> or as she more poetically expresses it, of “milestones gathering behind me.”<sup>120</sup> Evidence of this accumulation of milestones gathering behind me resides in boxes and objects that pepper my studio space in various states of transformation, on their way to becoming something else, present as fragments or moments of identity formation and shared experiences.

## **Soft car adolescence**

Adolescent rites of passage are part of the dialectic between ritual and societal structures that acknowledge and strive to strengthen the functional connectivity between regions of development and experience. Within social and cultural contexts, they negotiate the impacts of diminished cognitive control over behaviours that often lead to riskier decision making and increased emotional sensitivities. The unstable status of adolescence is offset by heightened drives towards creative possibilities and the need for meaning making within notions of personal identity and the world more broadly. The ambiguities between potential and change of this developmental period are located within a cacophony of cognitive and physical changes and reveal themselves in the objects of research created as embodied entanglements between experience and meaning making.

Morgan Botdorf, Gail M. Rosenbaum, Jamie Patrianakos, Laurence Steinberg & Jason M. Chein in their report *Adolescent risk-taking is predicted by individual differences in cognitive control over emotional, but not non-emotional, response conflict* 2017 describe the phenomenon of affectively hot conditions of adolescence that lessen cognitive control and

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<sup>118</sup> Dethiville, *Donald W. Winnicott : A New Approach*, p.53.

<sup>119</sup> Jane Lazarre, *The Mother Knot* (London: Virago, 1987), p.157.

<sup>120</sup> Lazarre, *The Mother Knot*, p.157.

“increase risk taking.”<sup>121</sup> These “affective ‘hot’ contexts”<sup>122</sup> in cognition drive impulsive behaviours in situations such as first being behind the wheel of a car or engaging in acts of sexual experimentation. Morgan et al. outline the incentive processing system in which cognitive developmental timing is not in keeping with current social expectations and adolescent individuals experience “an increased drive towards the rewarding aspects of risk taking”<sup>123</sup> despite the dangers. The authors propose that an example of this risk and reward activation occurs more often between an adolescent and their peers during states of heightened cognitive and emotional arousal. Their research also suggests that the enterprise of eliminating a propensity towards risk taking and sensation seeking in adolescence has been unsuccessful to date due to limited access to controlled risky activities that may help reduce the desire for other more uncontrolled behaviours. This makes me consider the significant role rites of passage might play in creating spaces for orchestrating experiences for risky activities within controlled and supported environments and what forms these currently take in contemporary societies.

At the beginning of the twentieth century institutions such as The Boys Scouts (Baden Powell, 1907) and the experiential outdoor educational experiences of German Jewish pioneer Kurt Hahn (1920) were designed with the aim of using holistic methods to challenge the impulsivity and exuberance of the modern youth. Worried for the plight of this cohort of society, Hahn developed experience therapies with an emphasis on character building “in the face of discomforts, hardships, dangers, mockery, boredom, scepticism, impulses of the moment.”<sup>124</sup> As founder of the Outward-Bound organisation, which is still operational today, Hahn’s influence continues in the form of many other experiential programs, awards, schools, visions, quests, adventures, and journeys, which a quick search on the internet reveals. Ritual theorist Ronald L. Grimes in *Deeply into the Bone: Re-inventing Rites of Passage* (2002) suggests that there is a persistent and deep spiritual longing, “a half-conscious hunger,”<sup>125</sup> that calls us to reclaim and reinvent initiatory traditions in our contemporary societies such as those of vision quests and other ordeals. Although they are designed in the spirit of developing self-growth

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<sup>121</sup> Morgan, Botdorf et al., "Adolescent Risk-taking is Predicted by Individual Differences in Cognitive Control over Emotional, but not Non-emotional, Response Conflict," *Cognition and Emotion* 31, no. 5 (2017): p.973.

<sup>122</sup> Botdorf et al., "Adolescent Risk-taking is Predicted by Individual Differences in Cognitive Control over Emotional, but not Non-emotional, Response Conflict," p.972.

<sup>123</sup> Botdorf et al., "Adolescent Risk-taking is Predicted by Individual Differences in Cognitive Control over Emotional, but not Non-emotional, Response Conflict," p.972.

<sup>124</sup> K. Hahn, "The problems of citizenship in German Education," (Schloss Spetzgart, 88662 Überlingen Germany: Salem International College, 29th December 2020 1928), p.3. <http://www.kurthahn.org/>.

<sup>125</sup> Grimes, *Deeply into the bone: Re-inventing Rites of Passage* p.112.

and enhancement for young people, Grimes suggests that there must be a sensitivity towards cultural appropriation of rites to avoid forms of cultural exploitation. To “honour the inward journey of the adolescent,”<sup>126</sup> through reinvented initiations means not borrowing from sacred ceremonies, traditions, and practices of First Nations cultural initiation ceremonies, but instead paying attention to moments of incidental initiation which Grimes suggests “goes on all the time”<sup>127</sup> in our contemporary societies. Utilising our roles as parents, mentors, elders, and artists we have the capacity to mythologise these moments of passage, to catch glimpses of them within this fast-paced world of over stimulation that our youth navigate daily and give them shape, even if only very ambiguously and expressively anti-structural in nature.

## Teen car culture

A society’s secular definitions do not allow for the existence of a not-boy-not-man. **Victor Turner**<sup>128</sup>

In the Australian context, owning and driving the first car acts as a pivot, a site of both possibilities and freedom. There is something about the noise that excites. The first car is something you spend endless hours having multiple experiences in. Much energy and time is devoted to driving around with the sound of the engine resonating through the body. It is a capsule of time especially in those first years of driving. Teens (specifically boys) and cars are a focus of this research; the risk adverse nature of the first years spent dealing with the freedom and burdens of this adolescent phase of life. The symbolic status of the car in Australian society is explored in the exhibition *Supercharged: The Car in Contemporary Culture* held at the Institute of Modern Art in 2006. Exhibitions manager Vanessa McCrae in her catalogue essay ‘We Make the Cars and the Cars Make Us’ (2006) states “life is often described as a journey, so it’s not surprising that rites of passage are often tied to the possession of a car.”<sup>129</sup> McCrae suggests that wrapped up in memories of our first car are physical and psychological connections with “liberty and identity” that go beyond the car as a machine, making it a symbol of Australian culture that shapes and moulds us in constructing an “ensemble of values and

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<sup>126</sup> Grimes, *Deeply into the bone: Re-inventing Rites of Passage* p.114.

<sup>127</sup> Grimes, *Deeply into the bone: Re-inventing Rites of Passage* p.89.

<sup>128</sup> Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p.95.

<sup>129</sup> McCrae Vanessa, *Supercharged: The Car in Contemporary Culture* (Fortitude Valley Qld: Institute of Modern Art, 2006), p.2.

opportunities, a way of life.”<sup>130</sup> The first car provides a means of escape and sense of freedom from parental control, where peer groups can meet and hang out in parking lots or go cruising together which is a frequent sight in small country cities. The car is rich with the potential of experiences of car culture and many of the artists featured in the group exhibition explore the salacious depravity of “reckless youth and casual sex” that since the 1950’s McRae believes to have seen the car “associated with loose morals and the invention of the teenager.”<sup>131</sup> She further describes the car as a “locus of conflicting desires” in terms of both freedom and restrictions, with the work presented as part of the exhibition ranging from a sense of nostalgia to celebrations of fading milestones such as “getting your licence, your first car, your first sexual experiences.”<sup>132</sup> As I write this thesis chapter such nostalgia mingles with the sounds of the V8 Supercar Bathurst 1000 as an annual ritual occurrence across the span of my life that still continues to drift in from somewhere outside in the shed amid the pops of beer tops.

For the male ego, cars have long served to “amplify and idealise their libidinal energies,” to act as extensions of masculinity while at the same time reflecting a male space “coded as deeply feminine”<sup>133</sup>. Although McRae is referring to the flesh pink car interior of the photographic work by Martin Mischkulnig in *The Hatchback* (2004), this coded femininity is a phenomena of Australian car culture that proliferates well beyond car interiors. I cannot recall how many times in my life language has also embraced this coded womanliness and I have heard words to the effect ‘she’s a beauty’ or ‘I’m taking her in for a service,’ idioms in reference to cars that do not seem to disappear despite being rendered archaic, objectifying and sexist in contemporary society.

McRae discusses the car as an object offering the illusion of protection “from the outside world. The Car’s body is metal skin, personal armour.”<sup>134</sup> With *Car Cocoon: Love and Other Collisions #2* (2020 – 2022) the car is wrapped, caressed, and softened, reflective of something much more luminous and vulnerable. The literal wrapping of the original object is bandage-like and the cast emerging out the process becomes a site of potential collapse or protection that sits between the conflicting sense of mixed messages of restriction and freedom the car represents. The commonly held idea of boys behind the wheel of a car is reflected in McRae’s

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<sup>130</sup> Vanessa, *Supercharged: The Car in Contemporary Culture*, p.2.

<sup>131</sup> Vanessa, *Supercharged: The Car in Contemporary Culture*, p.4.

<sup>132</sup> Vanessa, *Supercharged: The Car in Contemporary Culture*, p.6.

<sup>133</sup> Vanessa, *Supercharged: The Car in Contemporary Culture*, p.3.

<sup>134</sup> Vanessa, *Supercharged: The Car in Contemporary Culture*, p.4.

opinion that they “turn into thrill seekers. They are the worse culprits when it comes to speeding, drink-driving, and general motor mayhem. A live-fast-die-young devil-may-care attitude prevails,”<sup>135</sup> where the essence of driving pleasure can be breaking the law and flouting the highly regulated rules and regulations of the road. For McRae, as for myself “gaining independence and becoming an adult are linked to driving. Getting your licence is a defining moment: a rite of passage.”<sup>136</sup> We are all entangled in this site of concern and privilege. Inviting it into the symbolic realm of contemplation for the reinvention of rites in our contemporary world, both softens my own irrational mother guilt and reveals itself as a cradle or container in which to hold our embodied resonances and the transformational residue of our experiences.

Whilst expressing my own entanglements in mothering this experience, I am also acknowledging that both parents and ‘all’ caregivers know the vulnerability and accident-prone, risk-taking nature of adolescents on the wide-open road. Australian researcher Suzanne Vassallo in her report *Risky Driving Among Teens* (2018) summarises that statistically “most P-plates (eight in ten) and more than half of learner drivers aged 16–17 had engaged in some form of risky driving during their ten most recent driving trips.”<sup>137</sup> *VicRoads Guide for learners* (2017) also require us to embrace the fact that in the first year of driving “probationary drivers have three times the risk of being in a crash where at least one person is injured or killed.”<sup>138</sup> Ingesting such statistics, I am thrown back into the sense of worry and helplessness I experienced after the birth of my first child. In this space I am overcome with the weight of responsibility that threatens to totally overwhelm, struggling irrationally over something that is trying to teach me a lesson about letting go, I try to release my hold over these feelings. I have no hope of ever controlling the conditions and experiences of life to come. It’s strange how sensed moments like these intermingle within as if no time has passed at all, as if I am back in the moment of the memory itself.

Australian artist Ben Quilty’s car paintings provide some insight into the psychological journeys young men undertake as part of our iconic Australian car culture. On first encounter with Quilty’s paintings I remember feeling relief to see this part of Australian culture being explored as something other than a bogan, redneck, and lowbrow subculture. Its elevation as

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<sup>135</sup> Vanessa, *Supercharged: The Car in Contemporary Culture*, p.4.

<sup>136</sup> Vanessa, *Supercharged: The Car in Contemporary Culture*, p.4.

<sup>137</sup> Suzanne Vassallo, *Risky driving among Australian teens*, Growing Up in Australia (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2018), p.67, <https://growingupinaustralia.gov.au/research-findings/annual-statistical-reports-2018/risky-driving-among-australian-teens>.

<sup>138</sup> VicRoads, "Guide for Learners," ed. VicRoads (Kew Victoria: VicRoads, 2017), p.45.

a subject matter worthy of exploration through painting seemed to justify my own experience of growing up with a family history of so called ‘petrolheads,’ of all sexes I have great love and admiration for in terms of their challenges, successes, and failures behind the wheel both on and off the racetrack.



Figure 17: Mum (Freda) at S.A. Country Women’s Saloon Car Titles 1975-76: 2nd place, archival image, photographer unknown

This sentiment is echoed in the essay by art theorist Laini Burton ‘Growing Pains – A Journey Through BEN QUILTY LIVE!’ (2009), where she suggests the artists car paintings have been able to bridge the gap between “this notoriously low culture activity with the lofty heights of a fine art tradition.”<sup>139</sup> Burton suggests the car serves to give the owner a “feeling of immortality” and where consideration for “the possession of a car is a familiar rite of passage.”<sup>140</sup> These are claims well supported across many scientific and statistical studies into teenage development physiology and which Quilty’s work opens up as part of a discussion into conceptions and formations of Australian male/masculine identity. In the ABC documentary *Ben Quilty and The Maggots* (2010) Quilty states “there’s this whole thing about young men being all together and going through rites of passage in a way. They create their own initiation

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<sup>139</sup> Laini Burton, "Growing Pains: A Journey Through 'BEN QUILTY LIVE!'," *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 224 (2009): p.25.

<sup>140</sup> Burton, "Growing Pains: A Journey Through 'BEN QUILTY LIVE!'," p.25.

processes, go out, get smashed with your mates and somehow find your rite of passage through that act of getting smashed.”<sup>141</sup> Quilty explains his experience as a way of both initiating himself and of his mates initiating each other. For him, a car holds and is wrapped up in identity formation and “so much of what a young man, how he would hope that society would see him”<sup>142</sup>



Figure 18: Ben Quilty, *Crash Painting* 2010, oil on canvas, 140 x 190cm, <https://www.deutscherandhackett.com/auction/lot/crash-painting-2010>

Curator Lisa Slade in her essay ‘Ben Quilty: We are History’ (2009) describes Quilty’s upbringing as a “a white yobbo dreaming,”<sup>143</sup> representing a car as “the last remaining site of initiation”<sup>144</sup> and articulating a crisis of the masculine. Slade writes “the car for Quilty became an irresistible symbol of mortality, mateship and masculinity – a *vanitas* motif or reminder of the transience of life.”<sup>145</sup> Quilty himself views his car paintings simultaneously as both portraits and landscapes. Professor Jacqueline Millner adds to this in her essay ‘Ben Quilty

<sup>141</sup> Daniel James et al., *Artscape: Ben Quilty And The Maggots* (Australia: ABC broadcaster, 2010).

<sup>142</sup> James et al., *Artscape: Ben Quilty And The Maggots*.

<sup>143</sup> Lisa Slade, "Ben Quilty: We Are History," in *Ben Quilty*, ed. Michele Helmrich Slade Lisa (Brisbane: The University of Queensland Art Museum, 2009), p.14.

<sup>144</sup> Slade, "Ben Quilty: We Are History," p.14.

<sup>145</sup> Slade, "Ben Quilty: We Are History," p.14.

and the Emotional Eloquence of Painting' (2009) suggesting a connection between painting and "identity against the grain"<sup>146</sup> evident in the painter's work. Notions of youth are tested by the artist through "excessive alcohol and speed"<sup>147</sup> providing us with a hazy iconography of familiarity in our own difficult to determine culture through his choice of subject matter. For Miller there are qualities of empathy and tenderness evident in the paintings that "draw on the anti-social 'rites of passage' of a particular Australian masculinity," as part of the artists personal journey and exploration into "the painful process of negotiating one's place in the world, either as an individual or as a nation."<sup>148</sup>

In the story of personal journey for my own adolescent child the sculptural fragment of the front-end of the car operates as a shell of both psychological and symbolic dimensions, reading as a strangely metaphoric chrysalis or womblike form that hovers gently between the truth of the stories it holds and my own mothering imagination in adopting processes through which to transform it. This psychological sculptural shell of a car holds within it the paradoxical ambiguities of liminality, of both the struggles and possibilities for what goes on inside, within inner geographies and territories of wandering and searching for instances and experiences for meaning making within contemporary societal structures.

My child explains watching the sculptural form hovering in the studio like some fragmented luminous apparition of its former self as an emotionally charged and painful feeling. Hanging lightly, suspended in a heighten emotive and heady space between what was and what will be, it acts for him as a reminder of a tumultuous time of struggle and growth, one my child assures me he has learnt from and that marks something significant about this unique part of his story and journey. Wrapped within its luminous folds are also a sense of the relational intersubjective nature of mothering a child through the intensities of these first car experiences. Embedded within artistic processes of making, what is retained are resonances of my attempts to remain attentively and empathetically engaged with the challenges of situations and events arising around both the getting of a first car and created because of it and the next chapter explores this further through the provision of mothering care.

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<sup>146</sup> Jacqueline Milner, "Ben Quilty And The Emotional Eloquence of Painting " in *Ben Quilty*, ed. Michele Helmrich Slade Lisa (Brisbane: The University of Queensland Art Museum, 2009), p.38.

<sup>147</sup> Milner, "Ben Quilty And The Emotional Eloquence of Painting " p.38.

<sup>148</sup> Milner, "Ben Quilty And The Emotional Eloquence of Painting " p.38.

## Chapter 2: The Care

The nearest kind of association is not mere perceptual cognition, but, rather, a handling, using, and taking care of things which has its own kind of knowledge. **Martin Heidegger**<sup>149</sup>

This chapter explores the metaphorical dynamic of materials in the studio related to things of sentimental and personal symbolic value, some kept as a mothering impulse of nostalgic or sentimental care, while others being treasures left behind by my children and stored in boxes in the shed as memorabilia belonging to their own unique personal life journeys and stories. I felt an emotional connection to these things held onto and which I conceived of as also holding resonances of the habitual and developmental patterns of their youth and social lives, emanating from the personal and collective rhythms of our daily shared familial experiences. It was these things, like fragments of memories, along with a collection of wooden tree knots gathered from walks and camping trips out in surrounding Latje Latje country, that through the tacit handling and care of my hands slowly transformed and coalesced together through ritualised experiences of making and repetition.

Developed as an experiential way of working at the beginning of my research, tending to the kept and collected fragments and transformations of things through processes of making and knotting together became a way of staying with the crisis and ongoing dramas emerging within liminal qualities and spatiality's of adolescence. Anthropologist Victor Turner<sup>150</sup> (1974, 1982) invented the term 'social drama' to examine both scientific and artistic ways of exploring social life and the "innumerable genres of cultural performance"<sup>151</sup> he believed existed within more complex large-scale societal structures. Containing both social and psychological characteristics, Turner's analysis and awareness of social drama explores "the 'theatrical' potential of social life...[and] the power of symbols in human communication"<sup>152</sup> to combine,

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<sup>149</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p.63. See also Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974.

<sup>150</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*. See also Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974.

<sup>151</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.104.

<sup>152</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.9.

mutually translate and convey messages. For Turner, the social ground of drama and its narratives are of a processual nature that sit outside of more routinised, ordinary experiences of daily life. Liberated momentarily from the cultural script of normative demands he suggests performative action “even its apparently quietest moments, is characteristically ‘pregnant’ with social drama.”<sup>153</sup> Encounters within periods of liminal crisis respond to narratives of social drama through symbolic processes and interactions revealing of Turners notion of “subcutaneous levels of social structure for every social system.”<sup>154</sup>

In relation to the social drama of adolescent crisis and passage within the narrative dimensions of my children’s experiences, ritualisation occurs through a repetitive process of transformation and knotting together through the making of things, but also through experimentation with performance as an active response to Turner’s concept of experience which refers to “what has been lived through.”<sup>155</sup> He maintains that the subjective depths of individual experience need to be “accessible to the sympathetic penetration of other ‘minds.’”<sup>156</sup> and proposes an anthropology of performance as a reflexive activity of “dramatistic empathy, sympathy, friendship, even love as we acquire ever deeper structural knowledge in reciprocity.”<sup>157</sup> Remaining outside the boundaries of dominate political and cognitive structures such spheres of symbolic action as proposed by Turner are innovative and adaptive, maintaining their own structural interrelatedness. Such ideas are explored further through video artist Angelica Mesiti whose work is discussed in detail in the Ritualised softening’s and swellings category later in the chapter. In Mesiti’s work such liminal betweenness attends more to the spiritual dimension of informal performance than that of more formal family crisis but is still nonetheless engaged in the possibility of the performative purposes of ritual through a sharing and intersubjectivity of experience.

## **On caring and collecting**

The performative aspect of the fruits of my labour coalesced into a work exhibited as part of the interdisciplinary symposium *CARE: transforming values through art, ethics, and feminism* in October 2019. Held at the George Paton Gallery at the University of Melbourne, the

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<sup>153</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.11.

<sup>154</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.10.

<sup>155</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.12.

<sup>156</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.14.

<sup>157</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.101.

conference featured talks, performances, workshops, and artworks, with over fifty participants from around Australia across four days. As a research project for thinking and practicing care in innovative and inspiring ways the project supports alternative forms and perspectives to neo-liberalism and in articulating the aims of the project states:

Care will take an interdisciplinary approach through multiple perspectives, not only those of artists, art theorists and curators, but also from the many fields in which care is of central concern such as political science, philosophy, law and human rights, and health, providing opportunities to build cross-disciplinary links.<sup>158</sup>

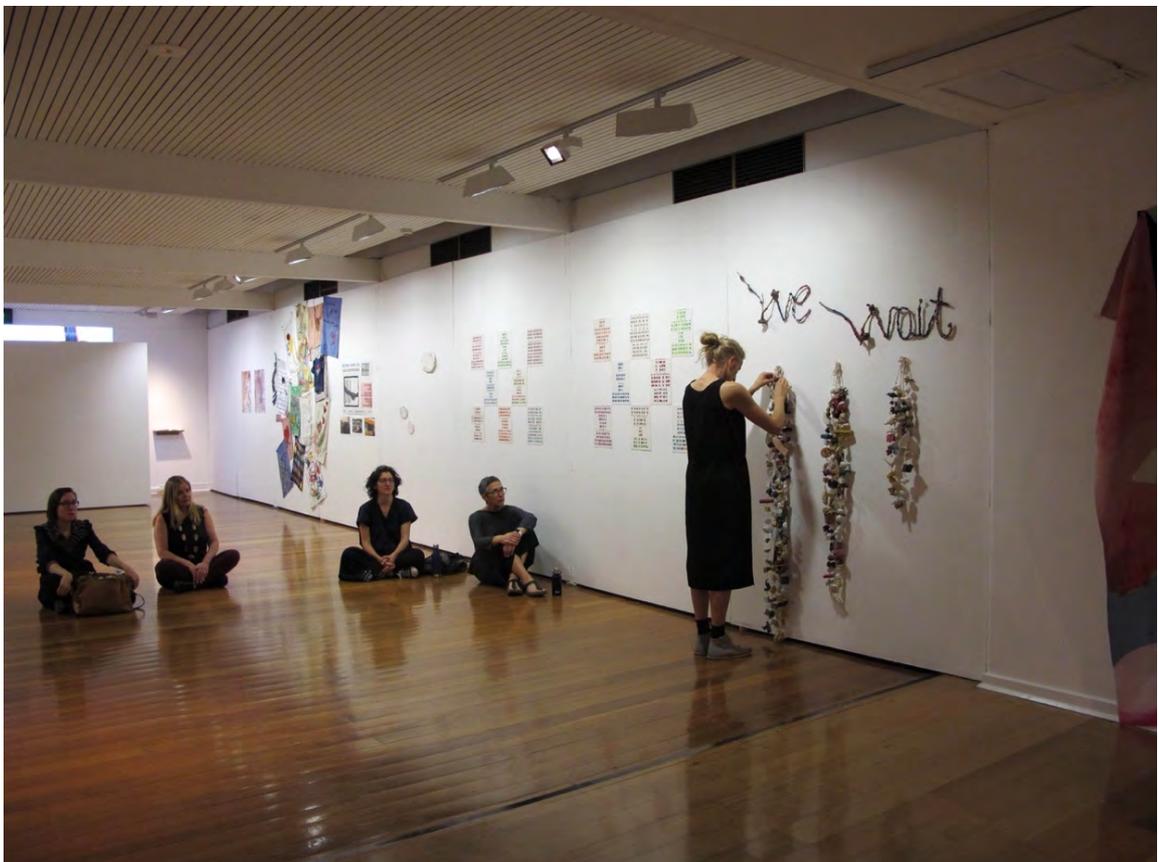


Figure 19: *We Wait What Else Can We Do?* 2019, Care Symposium, wearable sculpture and performance/installation, George Paton Gallery, University of Melbourne, photographer unknown, <https://contemporaryartandfeminism.com/care/the-care-project-symposium-week/care-symposium-melbourne-2019>

<sup>158</sup> "CARE - Feminism, art and ethics in neo-liberal times ", Contemporary Art and Feminism, 2017, accessed January, 2020, <https://www.contemporaryartandfeminism.com/care> (Research Symposium ).

The sculptural performance and wall installation of fragmented objects and text presented at the Care symposium was *We Wait What Else Can We Do?* (2019). The work explored a form of presentation made through simple gestures of action and activation, removing them from the wall and wearing them in a ritualised and improvisational form of sculpturally embodied performance of mindful attendance to the objects and events of transformational passages for others. Improvising with the metaphorical and sacred quality of ephemeral and everyday materials and experiences is the concern of Professor of Humanities Lynda Sexson in her book *The Ordinarily Sacred* (1982). She proposes what becomes manifest is in “the little things we save – ‘stuff’ in children’s boxes, by the things we say that get repeated - our texts of our lives, by our jokes and our dreams, by the way we play,”<sup>159</sup> and suggests that something akin to religious ritual in the contemporary world comes to us via improvisational activities where an “interplay of old and new is at once iconoclastic and remythologizing.”<sup>160</sup> Sexson says it is the metaphorical dynamic of particular moments of ordinary existence that explains our imaginal realities and fabricates our identification with personal symbol making, so that such objects of growth are able to imbue a “depth and integrity to our lives” providing an opening within to the human experience toward possibilities for communing with the metaphoric and sacred qualities of life.<sup>161</sup> She explains that the stuff we keep and identify with are the things that act as vessels and entrances for our imaginal realities in Western consciousness. That we shape around each other and ourselves the sacred text of our stories even if they are only apprehended through “fragments of image and feeling,”<sup>162</sup> where it is the symbolic dynamism of the object, not the object itself that holds this improvisational potential of sacred dimensions.

Renewing and transforming the objects and materials that both myself and my children have found too difficult to discard connects with Sexson’s idea that the objects, like the nature of first memories “resonate in a larger design”<sup>163</sup> and are part of imagining the uniqueness of flowing events within the mundane objects and rhythms of everyday familial life. I am not only physically holding onto these sentimental objects, but also exploring their developmental potential inside memories of actions they engender as markers

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<sup>159</sup> Lynda Sexson, *The Ordinarily Sacred* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), p.2.

<sup>160</sup> Sexson, *The Ordinarily Sacred* p.1.

<sup>161</sup> Sexson, *The Ordinarily Sacred* p.6.

<sup>162</sup> Sexson, *The Ordinarily Sacred* p.47.

<sup>163</sup> Sexson, *The Ordinarily Sacred* p.47.

belonging to a slower residual of improvisational dynamic. For Sexson, a symbolic understanding of the self is connected, like an imprint, to earliest memories that reside within “imagistic or tactile impressions involving little more than form and texture,” and the collective drama and power of these fragmented memories, images, and feelings, resonate in and “recapitulate the great myths of our civilisation.”<sup>164</sup> Whether accurate or imaginal she believes these first memories are concealed within sensitivities of everyday experience where finding personal spiritual meaning comes from such treasures that culminate in making the ordinary sacred and special. In rejecting the Western canon of dualistic thought, she claims instead that in our time we are living through a change in thinking whereby “we can discover or recognize the sacred within the secular, or the divine in the ordinary,”<sup>165</sup> and that through this process we can remythologise and rediscover “as children do, the stuff for our boxes, the phrases for our texts, the residues of our dreams,”<sup>166</sup> which form something of our mythic constructs.



Figure 20: Childhood Wooden Stacking Blocks and Toys, image by Kerry Sylvia

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<sup>164</sup> Sexson, *The Ordinarily Sacred* p.46.

<sup>165</sup> Sexson, *The Ordinarily Sacred* p.3.

<sup>166</sup> Sexson, *The Ordinarily Sacred* p.119.

## Mothering knots

Since commencing this research, a collection of what I refer to as tree knots or knot like structures has been gathering in the studio. Along with other wooden and natural wonders, I encounter these within the matter and debris fallen to the ground as I wander, walking alone or with the company of family through the Victorian mallee bushlands. I began working with these knots in the studio as a way of improvising with them as connective fragments and markers of place within the natural world that presented themselves as objects with their own potential metaphorical and symbolic values. In relation to transformational rites of passage experiences within adolescence, the tree knots act symbolically as ruptures and imperfections in nature that seemed to hold and reflect something of the awkward teenage years with their own bumps in the road and entanglements of psychological and emotional complexities. From a midlife mothering perspective to these challenging adolescent developmental phases, author, and poet Jane Lazarre in *The Mother Knot* (1987) afforded me insights into encounters with these objects and the knotted feeling carried in the pit of my stomach that held something of my own mothering anxieties, shortcomings and guilt connected to my lived experience of such periods of mutually affective transitional potentials and uncertainties.

Like many other books written on the theory and practice of motherhood, Lazarre's book focuses on the experience of the new mother, but it does so from her own pure experience. She challenges motherly love as a universal biological imperative declaring it "the great motherhood lie" of natural and cultural expectations and I share in the raw honesty of Lazarre's sentiment that both self-love and motherly love struggles and grows "out of confusion, knowledge, misery and necessity."<sup>167</sup> Coming to terms with the permanent struggle of dealing with ongoing emotions of mothering continues, in my own experience, well into the colliding phases of adolescent development and mothering during the middle phase of life. It does not recede with time; we just focus on it less as a society adding to its reduced visibility as a period of life discussed and theorised. Lazarre explains that finding a style of mothering that fits each unique entanglement of mother and child relationship is a way of allowing the experience of mothering to "take on a shape of its own."<sup>168</sup> In working with and making casts from the

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<sup>167</sup> Lazarre, *The Mother Knot*, p.156.

<sup>168</sup> Lazarre, *The Mother Knot*, p.171.

wooden knotty forms the objects began to evolve as fragments or glimpses into possibilities for these relational entanglements and their contours.



Figure 21: Found and Collected Woody Tree Knots (galls), image by Kerry S Sylvia

## The nature of knots

Knots are more numerous than the stars; and equally mysterious and beautiful.

**John C. Turner**<sup>169</sup>

Arboriculturist Dr Gregory Moore explained through email correspondence on January 25<sup>th</sup> (2022) that in botanic studies the scientific name for many of the knot-like forms that I collected are woody galls that trees produce in response to insects laying eggs, and the trees sometimes encase these invaders and contain them, so they are not a threat to the tree. I imagine the relationship between them is both stressful but also a mutuality symbiotic and harmonious one. In the article, ‘The Relevance of Folkloric Usage of Plant Galls as Medicines: Finding the Scientific Rationale’ (2018) Seema Patel, Abdur Rauf, and Haroon Khan, tell us that “the galls which occur in a myriad of forms are phytochemically-distinct from the normal plant tissues, for these are the sites of tug-of-war.”<sup>170</sup> The tree produces these as abnormal growth developments in response to pest-imposed stressors as they strive to keep them contained. Patel, Rauf, and Khan explain that in First Nations communities, healthcare, and ancient folklore, the galls have a long evolutionary trajectory as dyes, food sources, medicines and “as therapeutics, much like other plant parts.”<sup>171</sup> They also maintain that galls are not likely to detrimentally damage a tree. My research of the woody knotted galls also belongs to a long and ancient knot-history that takes many forms and symbolic tangles, and diverse practices spanning history, physics, mathematics, geometry, the cosmological, folklore, and nature, to name but a few. Online journal archives such as The World Scientific Publishing Company comprehensively explore the function and uses of knots through the Series of Knots and Everything<sup>172</sup> adding continuously to their growing compilation of over seventy-two volumes.

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<sup>169</sup> and van de Griend P Turner J C, ed., *History and Science of Knots*, Series on Knots and Everything (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd, 1996), p.vii.

<sup>170</sup> Rauf Abdur Patel Seema, Khan Haroon, "The Relevance of Folkloric Usage of Plant Galls as Medicines: Finding the Scientific Rationale," *Elsevier Biomedicine & Pharmacotherapy* 97 (2018): p.240.

<sup>171</sup> Patel Seema, "The Relevance of Folkloric Usage of Plant Galls as Medicines: Finding the Scientific Rationale," p.241.

<sup>172</sup> "Series on Knots and Everything," (World Scientific Publishing Company, December 10th 2021). <https://www.worldscientific.com/series/skae>.

## Scatterings of spacetimatterings

Hovering somewhere between poetic and more symbolic resonances in my own work, the woody tree galls are potential sites of performative tug-of-wars, mingled agencies, and opportunities for meaning making. Quantum physicist and theorist Karan Barad in the interview ‘Intra-actions’ (2012) explains the mutual constitution of entangled agencies at play in things that constantly form and transform from within the action itself in a kind of relational and “ongoing iteratively intra-active reconfiguring.”<sup>173</sup> In encountering the knots on the ground as objects of matter and meaning making, phenomenological and metaphorical possibilities emerge in a continuum of their tree/host actions of non-human agencies. They become symbolic of what Barad tells us are:

differential patterns of ‘mattering’—diffraction patterns dispersed across differently entangled spaces and times, or rather *spacetimatterings*. The notion of intra-action marks an important shift in many foundational philosophical notions such as causality, agency, space, time, matter, meaning, knowing, being, responsibility, accountability, and justice.<sup>174</sup>

In encountering and working with the woody tree knots I am touched by and sense what Barad refers to as the intra-active “entanglements from within,”<sup>175</sup> and the shifting patterns of relationality. I feel and make metaphoric associations between the relational dynamics of the knots and the developmental dynamism and patterns between adolescence and midlife-mothering that seem, on some intimate level, to be connected within Barad’s dispersal of diffraction patterns.

Throughout this research I have talked with many other people that have shared their own stories of collecting and being enchanted by these knotty forms, telling me that they also succumb to an intuitive compulsion to pick them up and keep them as objects of fascination and wonder. This suggests to me a deeper collective foundation of entanglements,

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<sup>173</sup> Barad, interview.

<sup>174</sup> Barad, interview. p.77.

<sup>175</sup> Barad, interview. p.77.

relationships and knowledge is networks active in generating an impulse to respond to and engage with material and matter as forms of sacred connection, even if such a compulsion may have dimmed across time. In his book *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World* (2019) First Nations Aboriginal scholar Tyson Yunkaporta describes the collective memory of current civilised culture as hazy and eroded by systems of power and dominance. He tells us assistance is needed in “sharing patterns of knowledge and ways of thinking that help trigger the ancestral knowledge hidden inside. The assistance people need is not in learning about Aboriginal Knowledge but in remembering their own.”<sup>176</sup> His urgent insistence towards a Western cultural renewal and reinvention of our connections to the tacit and imagined, the unknown and forgotten, keeps revealing itself in my research as primary to the work of creating meaningful ways of understanding and marking the experience of everyone’s unique story and as Yunkaporta suggests gaining “full maturity and knowledge again.”<sup>177</sup> He outlines forms of knowledge through “a basic model of the Turnaround event”<sup>178</sup> that occurs at the neurological level of a creative spark through haptic or embodied cognition processes, further explaining that:

At more complex levels, the meaning we make with places, people and objects and the way we organise interactions between these things becomes an extension of our thinking. Through meaning-making we affectively store information outside our brains, in objects, places, and relationships with others. This is how spirit works.<sup>179</sup>

In the studio, through actions of playing and caring for the knots I developed a daily ritualistic practice of casting them, making plaster multiples and slowly growing them in ever emerging numbers. Sometimes it felt like I was casting them as precious gifts and engaging with them as a form of process driven knowledge where, as Yunkaporta writes “the mind extends to the

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<sup>176</sup> Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World* (Melbourne, Australia: The Text Publishing Company 2019), p.163.

<sup>177</sup> Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*, p.163.

<sup>178</sup> Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*, p.110. In further explaining Turnaround Yunkaporta tells us it is an Aboriginal English word that was used to describe creation events and times before the term ‘Dreamtime’ was invented by settlers. Creation is not an event in the distant past, but something that is continually unfolding and needs custodians to keep co-creating it by linking the two worlds together via metaphors in cultural practice. These metaphors include images, dance, song, language, culture, objects, ritual, gestures and more. pp.110-111

<sup>179</sup> Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*, p.115.

non-tangible world...it bridges both worlds.”<sup>180</sup> At other times it felt more akin to housework, a never-ending daily chore at the edge of my own capacity for resilience, but still not without its own intrinsic routines and ritualistic dimensions. Through a repetition of maintenance and care the objects became tangible metaphors reflecting the binding forces of a mutually affective liminal state of transformative stirrings and its spatiality between worlds. Yunkaporta’s account of haptic knowledge and cognition within First Nations Australians is “encoded in relationships which is why kinship systems are so central.”<sup>181</sup> This First Nations intergenerational connection to land, culture, and family, I believe to be a sentiment applicable to all collective familial and kinship ties as interconnections that allow us possibilities to find ourselves in each other and engage with the metaphysical bonds between land and life.



Figure 22: Tree Knots: Preparation for Casting, image by Kerryn Sylvia



Figure 23: Latex Moulds for Casting Knot Forms, image by Kerryn Sylvia

Professor Lisa Feldman Barrett in *How Emotions are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* (2017) argues for emotions as constructed and reliant on perceptions in much the same way

<sup>180</sup> Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*, p.115.

<sup>181</sup> Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*, p.116.

as we perceive phenomena like sound or colour. She proposes an understanding of intergenerational knowledge whereby “emotion concepts have *social reality*”<sup>182</sup> linking the function of our biological makeup with the construction of social life. She maintains any universality of emotions is a myth with no emotional in-built fingerprints or fixed prototypes in our nervous systems, or brains. Instead, we pass down culturally specific learned emotion concepts, that “vary widely from culture to culture.”<sup>183</sup> Feldman Barret tells us that in neuroscientific terms the brain is wired to work beyond mere adaptation in actively shaping and sharing the social reality of cultural mores and values. She maintains these are passed on through social groups and amassed across generations as carriers of culture through “stories, recipes, traditions, anything that we can describe” in helping to create the “enormous power of collective intentionality” and intergenerational knowledge.<sup>184</sup> I experience intergenerational knowledge through a familial lineage of knots belonging to the Greek women on my mother’s side of the family. I remember watching the Armenian styled lace of my grandmother’s hands slowly and meticulously looping together and growing like magic before my youthful eyes. She told me the lace was adapted from the making of fishing nets in villages where she lived in Asia Minor (now Turkey). One of my most precious objects is a small beginning to a piece of lace I found in her sewing container years after her passing with the needle still poetically suspended in the ready position, as if eternally poised to make the next knot.

Watching my grandmother’s hands move I sensed something of the deep knowledge and connection to culture through these handicrafts. The rhythm, and meditative memories of the slowly emerging evidence of haptic touch between hand, needle and thread created movements both soothing and therapeutic, still palpably affective to this very day. It is as if these memories have gifted me some sense of tangible knowledge that also resides somewhere deep inside my body. It both embodies and enchants me, and I am grateful for this constant gift of sensation in my body. I chase such connections in my own art practice, seeking it out and staying attentive to it rising and falling throughout the practice of making and mediating on the events of passage that arise in my children’s lives. I was too impatient to learn this intuitive art of lace knots although my grandmother did try to teach me. Now I carry a lament of regret of not carrying on the skill as only she would have, could have taught me. Instead,

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<sup>182</sup> Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2017), p.133. Original authors use of Italics in quote.

<sup>183</sup> Barrett, *How Emotions are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain*, p.146.

<sup>184</sup> Barrett, *How Emotions are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain*, p.144.

the needlecrafts of my earliest memories are in hand sewing barbie dolls clothes with her. Through these actions with her I learned to sit with materials, allowing a development of meditatively repetitive qualities and intensities to emerge. Through hand stitching I discovered the art of going along with the material without any set pattern to follow. Through my grandmother's lace knots I learnt about processes of doing and undoing, a gift she gave me as insight into her own process in sensing and attending to things that you love.



Figure 24: Kerry Sylvia, *The Grace of Little Gifts* 2017, digital print 80cm x 64cm

As I work casting the knotty galls repetitiously in plaster and dyeing them in everyday substances from the kitchen such as coffee, tea, toilet blue and beetroot juice, they become symbolically significant as metaphors for the social reality of both Feldman Barrett's emotion concepts and for the function of rites of passage within our societies as tethers and linkages

that hold potential as sites for transformations and meaning making. Through actions of tending daily to these objects I experience them as emotional knots of knowledge transference where a sense of these micro collective wirings and ancestral knowledges of shared consciousness emerges from within mindful and ritualised practices of making.



Figure 25: Plaster Casting in Process from Tree Knots (galls) in the Studio, image by Kerryn Sylvia



Figure 26: Close up of Dyes Impregnated into the Surface of the Knot Forms (galls), image by Kerryn Sylvia

### **A box of costumes: practice as process**

The children's blocks, woody knots, and their plaster cast derivatives mingle with other materials such as heat manipulated fabrics from my daughter's box of costumes. In sifting through the box, a veritable treasure trove of polyesters and synthetics, hallmarks of the dance costume were revealed. I recall endless hours spent on the front veranda listening to her tap shoes, practicing, and perfecting the steps and moves, sometimes improvising to the music with dances curated as solos and with friends. This special box has literally danced around at home shifting regularly between rooms, and eventually finding its way into my studio. I was careful to seek my daughter's permission before experientially playing with the contents in discovering possibilities for ideas relating to the renewal of rites of passage in contemporary contexts.



Figure 27: My Daughter's Box of Dance Costumes, image by Kerryn Sylvia



Figure 28: Experiment with Heat Treated Fabric, image by Kerryn Sylvia

In contemplating stuff we keep, I remember my own childhood bedroom remaining the same way as it was during my adolescence long after I had journeyed out into the world, and my mother complaining from time to time about the cupboards full of things which were my own sacred and precious sources of attachment to past selves and developmental passages. I finally cleaned out my childhood bedroom when the house was sold in my mid-twenties, unearthing affective dimensions that the materials held for me once again, archiving many of them in various locations within my own family home to this day. Sexton writes “the junk that is precious to children-and adults-is precisely the stuff of the sacred,”<sup>185</sup> and forms something of the complex network of events experienced within the flow of the sacred time that runs in conjunction with work/play structures. For Sexton this is the latent power of the imaginal which “engenders and arranges all aspects of culture, ranging from ethics to garments, from relationships to trinkets. This metaphorical potentiality is playful – is play itself.”<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Sexton, *The Ordinarily Sacred* p.5.

<sup>186</sup> Sexton, *The Ordinarily Sacred* p.86.



Figure 29: Experimenting with Heat Treated Fabric Knots, image by Kerryn Sylvia

In playing and improvising with the box of dance costumes from my daughter’s youth, I speculate on the role practice and repetition might play in carrying us through awkward periods and struggles for expressions of identity during adolescence. In his book *Practicing: A Musicians Return to Music* (2007), author Glenn Kurtz tells us that “practicing anything we really love—we are always at the limit of words, striving for something just beyond our ability to express...aware in each moment of what slips away unattained.”<sup>187</sup> I can only account for my children’s habitual and ritualistic practice of something they love through my own youthful experience of playing classical guitar. There was a time that I had to suspend my love for playing music to concentrate solely on art. It is apparent now that the two disciplines are intimately connected and continue to inform and entangle with each other across passages of time. I was interested to know and so asked my daughter what she believed dance, if anything, had given her and she wrote:

*What dancing gave me was a way to order and conceptualise things as a routine; like a tool for ordering everything else in life. What dancing meant to me was a place where I could quietly and confidently achieve something I was*

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<sup>187</sup> Kurtz Glenn, *Practicing: A Musician's Return to Music* (New York: Alfred Knopf 2007), pp.13-14

*proud of. I also loved all the components that went on behind the scenes like getting measured for costumes and fussing over getting someone's hair bouffant exactly the right size. My fondest memory of dancing is waiting in the wings about to start and watching the group before me finish.*

When I enquired further into her own sense of adolescent passage and how it made her feel she sent me a quote that she had saved onto her Facebook profile back in grade six. I also recollect a deep sense of boredom during my adolescent passage that connects with this sentiment shared by my daughter, and like her practice of dance, I found learning classical guitar was a way of quietly striving to both achieve and work within a pervasive sense of ennui.

I wish i was anywere but home... I'm so bored 😞

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Figure 30: Anonymous Social Media Quote circa 2008, image archived by Tiana Sylvia

My son's time of crisis and intensity was spent within the shipping container in the backyard, which is discussed in greater depth throughout Chapter Three: The Church an emergent adolescent space of pseudo-sacred symbology, something utilised by him for the purposes of trying to leave home and potentially escape a similar sense of boredom. Ironically dubbed *THE CHURCH*, my improvisational mothering gestures towards the space intuited those first signs or desires for freedom that arise in the mid-teens that develop out of a palpable sense of identity loss. For my son that meant physically outgrowing his childhood passion for the sport of flat-track motorcycle racing. Nearing the end of my research, beyond the heightened drama of such experiential happenings, I have been able to ask him what he believed, if anything practicing this childhood passion for motorbikes had given him and he told me:

It gave me a freedom and made me feel free, that sense of speed was a rush that freed me from everything else while I was doing it. I did not have time to think about anything else but was just in the moment and everything else just went away. It meant that I was pushing something to the limit and experiencing

the adrenalin of it that was able to quiet everything else for a moment. When I outgrew the sport, my body I mean, it seemed like there was nothing else to replace the feeling, and I worried that I wouldn't be able to find the same rush again even though I went searching.

My son had his own romantic relationship with the endless laps of practice, with the vibrations of the machine beneath his body that held its own energies and pushed him to the limits of his abilities and his explanation reveals the paradoxical sense of struggle and loss within practice which Glenn Kurtz describes from his own contemplations on playing, practicing, and quitting music which is also applicable to anything we really love. As Kurtz writes:

The losses we suffer are real and cannot be wished away. But the beauty of music is that it embodies our love and our disappointment together, moving us forward and not repeating. With every passage, it teaches us the sweet, bittersweet joy of development, of growth, of change. Because playing music, you are constantly leaving home, constantly leaving where you are comfortable and secure, giving up what you have loved and striven for, loved, and settled for. You give it up, not knowing whether there is more ahead, whether what you will find next—what you will be next—will satisfy.<sup>188</sup>

This loss can be thought as a form of symbolic death followed by a period of chaos, of things breaking loose into anger, fear, and rage, before “learning to continue, living through what slips away”<sup>189</sup> and discovering a sense of wholeness and harmony through the transformative destruction of what was, and what is next. Moving through that process of losing something you love, of forms of poetic death and rebirth, is particular to the liminal phase of rites of passage described by many ritual theorists, anthropologists, and psychologists, and in relation to our own mingling of familial passage experiences and stories it is the stuff of our personal lives and memories. In returning to the ideas of Sexson, she expresses a sense of recapitulation of the self, perceived through passages of symbolic death whereby “people who are changing, emerging, ‘getting born’ also cast themselves into story. Inevitably these stories or

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<sup>188</sup> Glenn, *Practicing: A Musician's Return to Music*, pp 322-23.

<sup>189</sup> Glenn, *Practicing: A Musician's Return to Music*, p.321

mythologies of ordinary lives are littered, just like the great sacred stories, with stones, jokes, miracles, lies, bones, animals, and angels.”<sup>190</sup>

## **Improvising and anti-structure**

Experimenting and improvising with this littering of mingled ideas around daily practices, personal stories and the inner life of things was fundamental to my ritualised actions in making the necklaces and processes of anchoring them together. An analogy of the knots we hold onto and that hold onto us, are at the heart of making in the production of my work *We Wait What Else Can We Do* (2019). In traversing liminal passages during moments of crisis and transformation these necklaces as objects of adornment, act points of connection between nature and human societies in offering potential metaphorical shape to abstract concepts of time, meaning and experience intrinsic to between spaces of liminal phenomena. Casting, transforming, threading, and knotting for me became a way of attending to the affective intensities inherent within this idea of the threshold in adolescent passage and its entanglements with our daily rhythms of familial life.

Sitting with and knotting together the objects I was reminded of ritual actions belonging to prayers of the rosary enacted by close friends, or my Greek ancestral heritage of caressing strands of worry beads. Metaphysician Rene Guenon in *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science* (1995) explains the symbolism of circular forms through traditions such as the rosary connected to the sacred science of the “chain of the worlds.”<sup>191</sup> He also emphasises the essential function of the thread for its significance as the link between objects often rendered invisible in relation to the precious stones, beads or other objects that adorn such forms as a necklace. He explains “the primordial importance of the thread”<sup>192</sup> and its alternatives, as symbolic of passage in that it moves through the perforations in objects, linking them like an interval from one to another while maintaining a capability for doubling back on itself and forming knots along its trajectory, as part of a structural whole. Guenon further describes the knot as a point of operation for condensation and cohesion corresponding to temporary manifestations of determinate states of being where the occasion of “its

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<sup>190</sup> Sexson, *The Ordinarily Sacred* p.46.

<sup>191</sup> Guenon Rene, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, trans. Alvin Moore Jr (Cambridge, UK: Quinta Essentia, 1995), p.253

<sup>192</sup> Rene, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, p.254



liminality “as a fructile chaos, a storehouse of possibilities, not a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structures, a gestation process, a fetation of modes appropriate to and anticipating postliminal existence. It is what goes on in nature in the fertilised egg, in the chrysalis, and even more richly and complexly in their cultural homologues.”<sup>194</sup> My necklaces emerge out of such complexities and their storehouse of possibilities and chaos associated with the anti-structural character of liminal experiences. Hanging on the wall I think of them in terms of Victor Turners “cultural debris of some forgotten liminal ritual,”<sup>195</sup> where the coalescing fragments of collected and transformed objects hold their own strangely relational visual and tactile awkwardness, reflective of the adolescent life crisis state of psychological liminality. They act as metaphors for this liminal break and its modes of disorder, thought to be crucial in engendering potential for not only individual but also societal levels of rejuvenation and renewal. The necklaces and their mingling of parts, have a quality that makes me think about collaborative and dynamically processual forms of constructed identity formation, where differentiated markers and moments gather over the course of a life as a tension between fixed and fluid positions, emerging through the contribution and flow of passages like those functioning as rites and rituals.

The ambiguously connected material fragments entangled in the exaggerated and knotted necklace forms of my work *Wait What Else Can We Do* (2019) allow for contemplation into ideas around individual and collective cohesion as they improvise together in a unity of relational reciprocities. In making the objects and staying connected with the openness of processes conducive to conditions of the liminal mode, the ritually derived forms emerge out of a spatio-temporal liminality which Turner proposes as ultimately “ways of making [the social structure] work without too much friction”<sup>196</sup> and assisting through qualities of remedies and redress, the broader social stability and status quo. Turner tells us he believes the spirit of spontaneous liminal communitas to be “more a matter of ‘grace’ than ‘law,’ to use theological language,”<sup>197</sup> that offers within conditions of its arising moments of budding unstructured time open to change, the transformational, and possibilities towards salvation and newness. Hovering between notions of the past and present, this is “an instant of pure potentiality, when

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<sup>194</sup> Victor Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience*, ed. Edith Turner (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), p.295.

<sup>195</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.55.

<sup>196</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.54.

<sup>197</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.49.

everything trembles in the balance,”<sup>198</sup> holding possibilities towards meaning making and telos. Within a more loosely structured ritual framework, Turner proposes that in more complex contemporary societies, liminal leisure practices have “taken over the flow-function in culture”<sup>199</sup> as spaces of accessibility towards this trembling, subversive flicker thought to reside at the heart of revolutionary art, culture, and leisure. This liminal essence of grace is felt in the gut as a flow and quality of connectedness, but also more than this, as something fundamental that continuously keeps revealing itself and as Turner asserts “is always prestructural”<sup>200</sup> in its immediacy and spontaneity.

### **Performative objects: gift and burden**

Out of my inchoate performance with the necklaces and its placement into the open performative drama of social life grew an internal well of unexpected feelings with their own subjective and unstoppable form of emotional dimensions. I imagined the performance of *Wait What Else Can We Do?* 2019 being a series of simple nonverbal gestures as gifts to my children, playing with homonyms of meaning and working within a paradigm of ritualistically devised actions. The physical weight and discomfort of the objects operating as a form of endurance coupled with a mindful attentiveness of mothering actions, patiently and resolutely waiting for something to shift and transform in the lives of my adolescent children and carrying this burden with them. I anticipated and expected the physicality of the work and its visual symbolism but as the number of objects around my neck grew, I found myself totally overwhelmed by and unprepared for the emotional response to carrying the actual physical weight.

The sensation of the objects made me achingly aware of my body and its fading motherly usefulness, and the presence of their weight gathered momentum as I stood there feeling exposed, and strangely very vulnerable. As these emotions slowly built and swept through me, another sensation began, a feeling like a knot rising from the pit of my stomach. A sensation of loss began to consume and mingle with an overriding vulnerability and tears caught me off guard as they suddenly started to fall, and I struggled to contain them.

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<sup>198</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.59.

<sup>199</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.59.

<sup>200</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.58.



Figure 32: Kerry Sylvia, *We Wait What Else Can We Do?* (Installation view) 2019, plaster, wood, fabric, string, knots (written wall text not included), Care Symposium, George Paton Gallery, University of Melbourne

In hindsight I might have remained open to the experience and just allowed the emotions to wash over me but having no precedent or background to this way of working in a performative context I grasped for composure and proceeded to complete the loosely scripted actions rather than improvising with what arose. Rather more hurriedly than intended I turned away from the group and began to purposefully reinstall each of the objects back onto the wall from which they had come. I had not anticipated the real and palpable sense of loss that arose from the performative actions both for my children, but also for the spectre of motherhood in which I felt complicit and exposed. The societal weight in perceived expectations of the mothering myth was like an admission of my failures in the role.

Performatively sharing this with a room full of strangers was my burden to bear, overstepping unspoken boundaries of intimacy and privacy, and I knew that this was not the route the work would take in any future iterations. What I did discover through this early experiment into the awkward beauty of adolescent rites in a contemporary context, was my midlife mothering self as active agent intimately entangled and looped into the texture and complexities of these familial and social relations. There is something about attending to the mutuality between yourself and others that transcends your own limited psychological and embodied frames of reference and is complicitous in relationally shaping the action.

While standing there during the performance, another fleeting recollection went through my mind in the form of a book that left an impression from my adolescence. *Daughters of Copper Woman* (1981) by poet and novelist Anne Cameron is now criticised for its retelling of sacred women's and First Nations-centred storytelling from the peoples of Vancouver Island. However, my own empathic reciprocity with the scattered fragments of one story from its pages have danced around inside me for thirty years. Its stickiness, enfolded into my unconscious and psyche were awakened again standing there swathed in the weight of the objects at the George Patton Gallery. I acknowledge that this does not excuse any possibility of cultural appropriation that I may have drawn on in conceiving the forms as necklaces. Still, the latent power of stories lies in their potential to transmit and become heart or soul symbols for others, and for the blurring of boundaries between cultural narratives that can settle somewhere in the psyche or unconscious where things seem less acquisitive and more akin to the functioning of dreams.



Figure 33: *Mothering the Weight of Burdens* 2022, design by Kerryn Sylvia, digital image courtesy of Prue Hobbs

In revisiting the story 'Clowns' from Cameron's book, the orator Granny tells us that such important and revered members of the social dynamic play a role in imitating and intimidating those that have lost their sense of humility or values. These clowns are not like the fools of the circus in Western cultures, but are held in high esteem, considered more like shaman's or poets, in reflecting foolish behaviours and excessive displays of individuality back at those that are considered to have lost their way.<sup>201</sup> In further explaining the function of a clown in the story, Granny says "maybe you had a necklace you always wore and showed off, well, the clown would have bits of bark and twigs, and feathers, and dog shit, and old broken clam shells, and anythin' else you can think of, and it'd all be made up in a necklace like yours."<sup>202</sup>

The essence of the story itself is not what I have drawn into my unconscious, but rather it is the material construction of these necklaces themselves and their power to convey meaning relating to identity development and the spaces in which we lose our way that caught hold for only an instant of a moment. It revealed something about my impulse towards the collection of fragments and stickiness of improvised and repetitive gestures that went into the making and weight of the objects dangling and digging in together around my neck. Unlike the story my motivation is not one of moral teachings but rather lies in honouring the developmental experiences of contemporary forms of adolescent passage with their anomalous liminal moments, and in acknowledging my own mothering sense of the other as complicitous in and attuned to such journeys. Standing there waiting, the objects around my neck getting heavier and heavier, their physical presence became an embodiment of my mothering sense of burden and care arising within overwhelming emotions. But there is another aspect to them in that they are also symbolically carried as a reminder to live more attentively, to carry the weight of this burden with grace, as an entangled and relational form of soul work in mutuality and togetherness with my adolescent teenagers' experiences with the necklaces functioning like gifts of, for and to my children.

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<sup>201</sup> Anne Cameron, *Daughters of Copper woman* (Vancouver B.C.: Press Gang Publishers, 1981), p.109

<sup>202</sup> Cameron, *Daughters of Copper woman* p.109

## Ritualised performance and play

In Victor Turner's final essay 'Body, Brain, and Culture' (1986), he remains optimistic about revelations found within the transformative performance of "culturally shaped systems of ritual, symbols, and myths,"<sup>203</sup> linking them to liminal processes that he proposes "holds the generating source of culture and structure."<sup>204</sup> It is the internal and external generating source of both individual and group transitions that he connects to the cultural phenomenon of ritual processes and to the belief that there lies, between assorted genetic and experiential upper and lower brain functions, the possibility for a genuine dialogue conducive towards conditions of active "free interplay and mutual support—what is sometimes called love."<sup>205</sup> For Turner, innervations between semiautonomous systems of the brain share qualities with how ritual process plays a role in "performing noetic functions in ways peculiar to itself, as a sui generis mode of knowing," and he proposes a geology of the brain in which each of us as a microcosm in a living and related macrocosm, discovers meaning not only found "deep within us but also played from one mind to another as history goes on—with ever finer tuning—by the most sensitive and eloquent instrument of Gaea the Earth-spirit—the cerebral organ."<sup>206</sup> For Turner our interrelated network of mental functions and collaborating brains encompasses the depths of "the whole life-history"<sup>207</sup> associated with transitions, relations, and attachments. He proposes ritualised behaviours as a locus for such social processes and networks with incongruous elements and meta messages of play as their "dialectical dancing partner," sometimes viewed by cultural institutions as something volatile, subversive, and a "dangerously explosive essence"<sup>208</sup> to accepted social order that needs to be contained within the cultural landscape.

As well as being inherently recalcitrant, Turner explains play as something contemporaneously stored in culture as "a liminal or liminoid mode, essentially interstitial, betwixt-and-between all standard taxonomic nodes."<sup>209</sup> It is the surplus of excess energy arising in play that Turner suggests "enables it to perform the liminal function of ludic

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<sup>203</sup> Victor Turner, "Body, Brain, and Culture," *CrossCurrents* 36 2 (1986): p.172, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24458945>.

<sup>204</sup> Turner, "Body, Brain, and Culture," p.158.

<sup>205</sup> Turner, "Body, Brain, and Culture," p.178.

<sup>206</sup> Turner, "Body, Brain, and Culture," p.178.

<sup>207</sup> Turner, "Body, Brain, and Culture," p.178.

<sup>208</sup> Turner, "Body, Brain, and Culture," p.168.

<sup>209</sup> Turner, "Body, Brain, and Culture," p.169.

recombination of familiar elements in unfamiliar and often quite arbitrary patterns,” contributing to the organic evolution of “the social construction of reality.”<sup>210</sup> It is within Turner’s theorising on the contemporary phenomenon of surplus in societal energies that my performance of *Wait What Else Can We Do* (2019) sits, where the creation of liminal zones of experimentation and openness might offer insight into how contemporary culture creates conditions of noetic experience and sacred space. Turner maintains that “through the performance process itself, what is normally sealed up, inaccessible to everyday observation and reasoning, in the depth of sociocultural life, is drawn forth.”<sup>211</sup>

### **Ritualised softenings and swellings**



Figure 34: Angelica Mesiti, *Rapture (silent anthem)* 2009 video still, cinematography by Bonnie Elliott ACS, <https://bonnieelliott.com/VIDEO-ART/RAPTURE-SILENT-ANTHEM>

When I was first conceiving this research in relation to adolescence and rites of passage, the video work *Rapture (silent anthem)* (2009) by Angelica Mesiti came to mind as a contemporary form of performance and potentiality in realising moments of extraordinary involvement with each other outside of normative societal constraints. In *Nature and the Human Soul* (2008) depth psychologist Bill Plotkin writes of puberty as “mysterious changes

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<sup>210</sup> Turner, "Body, Brain, and Culture," p.171.

<sup>211</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.13.

in the body. Hormonal flushes. Sudden, unbidden stirrings, softenings, and swellings. The longing to touch and be touched, and the terror of it too. Fire!”<sup>212</sup> The visceral language of this quote reminds me of the slow-motion burn and sensory absorption of embodied musical experience at play in Mesiti’s work. Winner of the 2009 Blake Prize for Religious Art *Rapture (silent anthem)* (2009) holds us in the presence of a dynamism of flowing movement and youthful intensity of emotion that occurs when people are not aware they are being filmed. Curatorial assistant Lola Pinder in the book *A Communion of Stranger Gestures: Angelica Mesiti* (2017) describes the work as “observational but not voyeuristic, blurring the delineation of the public and private as personal moments play out within the spheres of public space and performativity.”<sup>213</sup> Shot into the crowd from the direction of the stage, the camera places the viewer in intimate contact with the youthful sea of faces, slowly moving, sweaty and perspiring, skin glistening, and swaying together in communal silence, affective in its ability to suspend us within “an interstitial state between childhood and adulthood – a fluid space of exploration.”<sup>214</sup>

In the article ‘Angelica Mesiti’s Rapture (Silent Anthem): Hearing with our eyes’ (2015), researcher Erika Kerruish writes of the performative scene as “the taut and disinhibited bodies of those who are transported. Usually safely hidden in noise, speed, and darkness, here they are stripped of sound and tempo and scrutinized, their euphoria thrown into relief. Within seemingly ordinary time and space, ecstatic experience is concealed.”<sup>215</sup> While Kerruish connects Mesiti’s video to a neoliberal reading of sensation and affect, my research relates this video artwork to the phenomenon of leisure time arising out of Western industrialised technological innovations. Mesiti’s video is representative of Turner’s exploratory limonoid regions of social action and commodification of choice, “liminoid phenomena, which tend to be the leisure genres of art, sport, pastimes, games, etc., practiced by and for particular groups, categories, segments, and sectors of large-scale industrial societies of all types.”<sup>216</sup> Turner proposes a multiplicity and complexity of genres in industrialised forms of leisure “allowing lavish scope”<sup>217</sup> to work in reinventing and imagining spatial constructs that have the potential

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<sup>212</sup> Bill Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul* (Australia: Finch Publishing, 2008), p.166.

<sup>213</sup> Lola Pinder, in *A Communion of Stranger Gestures: Angelica Mesiti* (Carlton, VIC: Schwartz City, 2017), p.179.

<sup>214</sup> Pinder, p.179.

<sup>215</sup> Erika Kerruish, "Angelica Mesiti's Rapture (Silent Anthem): Hearing with our eyes," *Continuum Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 29, no. No.4 (2015): p.593.

<sup>216</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.55.

<sup>217</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.40.

for connecting to ritual, spiritual, and religious connotations of secular societal structures. Within any passage that offers a moment of liberation from societal obligations there is a possibility of play falling into flow and Turner cites the work of psychologist Mihali Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1996, 1997) in outlining elements, qualities, and features of this systematic phenomenology.<sup>218</sup> While he acknowledges flow as it occurs within structures, for Turner flow theory also relates to the liminal and *communitas*, between and amongst relationships of individuals. This conception of flow resides in the realm of the pre-structural and emerges out of “dialogue, using both words and non-verbal means of communication such as understanding smiles, jerks of the head, and so on, between us.”<sup>219</sup> Accessing moments of flow requires acknowledgement of the forces that shape us and provides limits to what we can experience. These constraints help us to explain the harmony of flow within exceptional moments that stand out from the everyday such as Mesiti’s video which Pinder suggests “transcends place and circumstance to explore the idea of the collective...that leaves us with a sense of the unknowable or unattainable.”<sup>220</sup>



Figure 35: Angelica Mesiti, *Rapture (silent anthem)* 2009 video still, cinematography by Bonnie Elliott ACS, <https://bonnieelliott.com/VIDEO-ART/RAPTURE-SILENT-ANTHEM>

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<sup>218</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.56. Turner expands in detail on each of the Csikszentmihalyi's six elements of "flow experience." pp.56-58

<sup>219</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.58.

<sup>220</sup> Pinder, p.179.

Kerruish tells us that “as an anthem, the video can be thought of as a kind of silent, imagist music that moves the viewer. Music has an intense haptic effect in the way it affects and surpasses the individual”<sup>221</sup> engaging both feelings and sensation. The affective dimension of the video for Kerruish “shows the body and mind as inseparable,”<sup>222</sup> and engages the experiential complexities of rapture as an absorptive practice of heightened intensity. While many of us can identify with and engage in a reverie of the total sensual absorption communal experiences such as rock concerts and music festivals can illicit, we are especially impressionable and exposed to their power during adolescence with so many of these experiences pulling us for a moment into a leisure space both divined by and predominately directed at contemporary youth culture. Philosopher Catherine Clément in *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture* (1994) takes this idea further stating, “music is content to open the way to inner orgasm to everyone.”<sup>223</sup> She explores the psychic phenomenon of syncope as an intense moment of seizure, a threshold concept that throws the body into a rapture of formlessness and diffuseness that “reproduces the scenario of the syncope: a surprise, a delay of life, a violent anticipation, and a slow return to what one calls the ‘self.’”<sup>224</sup> *Rapture (silent anthem)* (2009) is grounded in the extraordinary suspension of “a shared syncope,”<sup>225</sup> the affective resonance of cinematic effect used to provide some insight into the concept’s elusive nature and which Clément suggests is tolerated for now in modern societies through “the ecstasy of rock n roll”<sup>226</sup> that fills the void of our disappearing societal “rituals that regulate,”<sup>227</sup> acting as a panacea of enrapturement for the senses.

Keeping with Turner’s radical rethinking of the liminal, the event of a rock concert can be imagined as an incubation space of ritual activity, cultural performance, and experience. For Turner “ritual, ceremony, carnival, theatre, and poetry, is explanation and explication of life itself” and ritualised experiences can be viewed in this light as performative in the way they open us to “what is normally sealed up, inaccessible to everyday observation and meaning.”<sup>228</sup> Richard M. Dunham, Jeannie S. Kidwell, and Stephen M. Wilson in their research paper ‘Rites of Passage at Adolescence: A Ritual Process Paradigm’ (1986) explain the analogous

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<sup>221</sup> Kerruish, "Angelica Mesiti's Rapture (Silent Anthem): Hearing with our eyes," p.598.

<sup>222</sup> Kerruish, "Angelica Mesiti's Rapture (Silent Anthem): Hearing with our eyes," p.598.

<sup>223</sup> Catherine Clément, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture*, trans. Sally O'Driscoll and Deirdre M. Mahoney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p.256.

<sup>224</sup> Clément, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture*, p.23.

<sup>225</sup> Clément, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture*, p.16.

<sup>226</sup> Clément, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture*, p.20.

<sup>227</sup> Clément, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture*, p.20.

<sup>228</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.13.

understanding liminal experience gives to a sense of the numinous, when “cosmic forces of the society are said to come into play and reveal to the individual what is called *Mysterium Tremendum*.”<sup>229</sup> For Dunham et al. this numinous concept, associated with rites of passage rituals and ineffable experience, results in “an extreme restriction and directedness of attention results, which is often characterised as a rapture, or a trance-like state.”<sup>230</sup> There is a powerful sense of this dynamic and shifting position throughout Mesiti’s film, evocative of both rapturous elements of the spiritual and an openness to intensity of experience. Though the synchronous movement of youth in the video is not intentionally about faith, belief or transformation, conditions of ritualisation that could incite such restructuring changes are potentially present in the moment, constructed as “a microcosm of the society/person process.”<sup>231</sup>

Building on the idea of a social psyche and dynamic from a more affective register, *Rapture (silent anthem)* (2009) carries what feminist philosopher Teresa Brennan refers to in her book *The Transmission of Affect* (2004) as an affective load of contagious and interactively dynamic group phenomena<sup>232</sup> which to her way of thinking is “a profoundly social thing.”<sup>233</sup> Brennan speculates on how absorptions of energies and emotions operate in groups, gatherings, and crowds. Brennan refers to contemporary research on processes of linked, repeated entrainment and chemical communication, where a complex combination of pheromones, nervous, electric, and rhythmic human affective responses are unconsciously at work “establishing and enhancing a sense of collective purpose and a common understanding.”<sup>234</sup> She uses biochemical and neurological research to “locate mechanisms for the transmission of affect and understand more of the energetic force of attention,”<sup>235</sup> believing that bodily movements and gestures within group activities, such as performance or dancing are “of a most intelligent order.”<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Richard M. Dunham, Jeannie S. Kidwell, and Stephen M. Wilson, "Rites of Passage at Adolescence: A Ritual Process Paradigm," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 1, no. 2 (1986): p.144, <https://doi.org/10.1177/074355488612001>.

<sup>230</sup> Dunham, Kidwell, and Wilson, "Rites of Passage at Adolescence: A Ritual Process Paradigm," p.144.

<sup>231</sup> Dunham, Kidwell, and Wilson, "Rites of Passage at Adolescence: A Ritual Process Paradigm," p.144.

<sup>232</sup> Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp.51-52.

<sup>233</sup> Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, p.68.

<sup>234</sup> Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, p.69-70.

<sup>235</sup> Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, p.42.

<sup>236</sup> Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, p.70.

As we watch the unconscious movements of the youthful crowd, we also give our attention to and get swept up in the unrehearsed scene that moves before our eyes. We become affectively drawn into a non-verbal exchange in social dynamics, one in which, as academic Justin Clemens in the essay 'A Communion of Gestures; or the Video Art of Angela Mesiti' (2017) explains, we see them, "their faces, hands and gestures, with an attention that would otherwise be impossible. Although we cannot share in the dancers' communion, we are privy to certain peculiarities of it happening through Mesiti's work."<sup>237</sup> The artist enhances the transmission of affect in her work through her dreamlike muted colours and undulating soft focus, along with mechanisms of slow motion and silence, with all these qualities together inviting opportunity for slowing down thought and allowing time for the fresh energy and intensity of inchoate ideas. Our minds can drift into a shared liminal temporality and spatiality of absorption with the captivated mobs. I am in agreeance with Clemens when he tells us of Mesiti's video that the crowd is "absolutely there in their spiritual abduction; and we too are there."<sup>238</sup>



Figure 36: Angelica Mesiti, *Rapture (silent anthem)* 2009 video still, cinematography by Bonnie Elliot ACS, <https://bonnieelliott.com/VIDEO-ART/RAPTURE-SILENT-ANTHEM>

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<sup>237</sup> Justin Clemens, "A Communion of Stranger Gestures Angelica Mesiti " in *A Communion of Stranger Gestures Angelica Mesiti* (Carlton, VIC Schwartz City, 2017), p.17.

<sup>238</sup> Clemens, "A Communion of Stranger Gestures Angelica Mesiti " p.17.

It is the spiritual dimension of Mesiti's video that hints at a potential of transcendence and which Clemens describes as "the very possibility, the promise, of meaningfulness,"<sup>239</sup> without attending to resolutions of personal crisis or change of status. This is a paradoxical spiritual performance of optional participation and enacted choices made within secular Western societies where definitive definitions of spirituality, religion and ritual remain slippery. In an article by journalist Antonette Collins, 'Blake Prize awarded to video artwork' (2009) Mesiti expresses her own surprise at her win as both the first video artwork to take out the prize and for its unconventional treatment of religious and spiritual concerns stating, "this situation is not one that you would associate with a traditional spiritual experience, but I believe that those heightened emotions and experiences can happen in unconventional spaces."<sup>240</sup>

The artist makes us to feel as if we are caught up in the intensity of a contemporary form of spiritual experience evolving out of the social atmosphere of the mosh pit of a rock concert where the collective behaviour of the participants is moved by the unheard rhythm of the music capturing a happening in liminal threshold time. Anthropologist Edith Turner, in her book *Communitas; The Anthropology of Collective Joy* (2012) tells us that through a happening in music, it becomes "obvious that we are encountering something spiritual... and we often attribute the benefit and wonder to something 'out there,' outside of ourselves."<sup>241</sup> Just as Brennan attributes intelligence to dance, Turner also believes in the intellectual nature and potential of music suggesting that it has the capacity to enthrall us, to call us to a zone of deep attention within its energy and power. As she explains, beyond boundaries of the skin and "by intimately sharing precise *time*, owing to the transformative power of rhythm, we *can* merge, and we find we are not separate."<sup>242</sup> For Turner, despite capitalisms hold on everything including the music industry, the music itself remains emotional, ineffable, vibrationally fleeting, and creates conditions from which *communitas* can emerge. She explains "communitas is a group's pleasure in sharing common experiences between people. This may come into existence anywhere,"<sup>243</sup> and through the experience of Mesiti's video, participants and viewers of the event get to share, even if only briefly, in a sense of being lost together, in the silent music of the moment.

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<sup>239</sup> Clemens, "A Communion of Stranger Gestures Angelica Mesiti " p.17.

<sup>240</sup> "Blake Prize Awarded to Video Artwork," ABC News, 2009, accessed 4th July, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2009-09-03/blake-prize-awarded-to-video-artwork/1416210>.

<sup>241</sup> Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* p.54.

<sup>242</sup> Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* p.48.

<sup>243</sup> Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* p.2.

Mesiti's video offers a context through which to explore Victor Turner's dimensions of social drama and performance and to think through the wellspring of emotion that threatened to overcome me when sharing my own ritualised gestural actions of care and reciprocity with an audience of strangers. In experimenting with a juncture between sculpture and performance, I have explored the sensory weight and repertoire of improvised gestures, feeling in some form of physicality, connection, and symbiosis with what is arising and becoming emotionally swept up in the moment shared with an audience. Discovered within the social drama of the moment is a willingness to stay open to the affective dimensions and intensities of events, whether rapturous, as in Mesiti's sea of communing adolescents, or when experienced on a smaller scale, as a solo performer communing with symbolically created objects and an audience. The ability to be carried away in the currents of each other's experiences is a force of ritualisation that I have channelled while meditating on the liminal conditions and behaviours of my adolescent children, feeling the ache of beauty, weight of their struggle and sense of loss. In the lecture *One, Not Two: Sacred Wholeness (Opening Remarks)* (2018) Buddhist author and teacher Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel explains a little bit of despair for the suffering of the world that you are reminded of in watching your own children struggle and suffer and that you cannot help but feel for their futures.<sup>244</sup> In her view that to be inclusive of this suffering means to be fully present to what comes up and not turn away from discord but to face it with compassion and find our way to action and she maintains that it is these passages we use to enlarge our sense of the possible and build resilience within the struggle.<sup>245</sup> Gathering heavily around my neck, the materiality and physicality of the necklaces act as a heartfelt reminder that my actions carry within them the burden that comes with caring and grows out of the simplicity of daring to deeply love one another.

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<sup>244</sup> Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel, "One, Not Two: Sacred Wholeness (Opening Remarks)," in *Festival of Faiths* (2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1Mxr9dXShE>.

<sup>245</sup> Mattis-Namgyel, "One, Not Two: Sacred Wholeness (Opening Remarks)."

## Chapter 3: The Church



Figure 37: Kerryn Sylvia, *The Church #II: Mothering Aftermath* 2019, double page spread, digital photograph from photobook *tuska teens*, 2022

### Making sacred: objects and spaces of adolescence

Everything is a church. **Coleman Barks**<sup>246</sup>

This chapter delves into liminal spaces of rites that transverse the ordinary, creating possibilities for ludic forms of ritual reinvention relating to an experience of teenage curiosity and calling to explore and experience what life holds and how meaning is created. In the initial stages of my practice and research, one of my adolescent children and their peer-group engaged in making space for themselves in which to experiment with potentials for

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<sup>246</sup> Magida assigns a chapter of his book to Coleman Barks and his informal initiatory rite of passage that set him on a path of translating Rumi poems. He describes Coleman as a "poet and visionary...the right guy to translate the poems of Rumi, the most beloved of mystical poets" p.230-231 Arthur J Magida, *Opening the doors of wonder reflections on religious rites of passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

transformative experiences in the backyard of our family home. For my son and his friends, a shipping container, converted for a brief time into a cocoon like cave or den was playfully dubbed *THE CHURCH*, the name evocative of a kind of pseudo sacred space in the minds and hearts of the adolescents and their activities enacted within, away from the prying eyes and world of adults. This chapter unfolds by thinking not only about the shipping container as a claimed, youth derived sacred space of belonging and flailing around in a church of broken dreams, but also about the plethora of images and objects of curiosity and rebellion that emanated from it, becoming markers of real-time events within the dense textures and intersubjective experiences of familial life. Mothering this space meant staying open to its spirit of liveliness and experimentation, and attentive to the ways we are driven in attempting to alter our realities and enact ludic forms of play outside of socially acceptable constraints, norms, and rules of society.

While I cannot know from first-hand experience the extent of passage or even if any real individual transformational shift may have occurred inside the space at all, the site seemed to offer itself as significant in marking some point of particularity and peculiarity of rupture or rite in the passage of an individual adolescent story. In contemplating this space as a liminal interstice and home for anti-structural visions and behaviours to flourish, I hold onto a subjunctive mood of mothering that enables imaginings and glimpses into the experiences of the other, where attending to the inarticulate and ambiguous forms that coalesce and gather requires a mindset of caring and tending, harnessed through practices of doing of making.

Photographic images proliferate from both within and outside of the church space, gathering and finding form as a photobook that plays with the nuances of liminality and adolescent passages, capturing something of the drama of real-time unfolding events, situations, and experiences as glimpsed parts of a poetic whole. Objects also erupt from the space symbolic of the shadow's role in the growth of psyche with an archetypal nature of principles and potencies also belonging to many elements of connections to inner and outer geographies of place. I improvise with these through sculptural methodologies, tending to them through processes of collecting, casting, and wrapping, with mindful attendance also paid to the stirrings of adolescent passage through simple gestures like walking, made as an offering to an impending sense of liminal adolescent wanderings. Explored through photography, video and sound, contexts for such ritualising practices arise as possibilities for contemporary forms of rites to flourish, and opportunities for making meaning grow out of the actions and the

events surrounding them. Later in the chapter, discussed in detail in the ‘Mothering ambivalence’ category, a focus on the early artworks of Louise Bourgeois reveals contexts for a subjunctive mood of possibilities that manifests in her work as an ambivalence of mothering tactics and processes for harnessing the emotional content of such feelings. Her processes of making become as much a part of the work as any other element in harnessing some sense of restorative and emotional release and Bourgeois unrelentingly extends her vision into the depths of taboo and unmapped possibilities of mothering ambivalence across her lifespan of artistic production.

### **Photobook as liminal world of possibilities**



Figure 38: Commencement of editing process for photobook *tuska teens 2022*, image by Kerryn Sylvia

As a multifarious body of work at an interstice between sculpture and photographic processes it became apparent that to deal with the volume of images collected and archived around my children’s adolescent experiences of time spent in the liminal zone that the development of a photobook might poetically and poignantly capture some sense of the shape of these experiences and offer glimpses into such mutually affecting states of crisis and fragmentation. The birth of the photobook began with a single image that grew into one of hundreds taken and collected between 2019 – 2022. As a result of this is the first image the reader comes across in the book. It depicts an innocuously scattered pile of bricks under a tree on the ground

in the fruit block behind our family home and thankfully represents the aftermath of a failed suicide attempt. It takes on meaning and is symbolic in terms of the story that accompanies it, where the despair and struggle that an adolescent experience of traumatic liminality can sometimes illicit, belies the very simplicity of the image and the extreme anxiety and guilt it represents in coming to terms with such near misses that feel like extremes of parental and mothering failure. It is evident that our family is not alone in this experience as statistics such as those of Australian Institute and Welfare (AIHW) website tells us that “Suicide is the leading cause of death among Australians aged 15–24 (See Deaths in Australia). The proportion of deaths by suicide is high among children and young people due to the fact these age groups do not tend to die from other causes.”<sup>247</sup>



Figure 39: Kerry S Sylvia, *A Meaningful Scattering of Bricks* 2019, iPhone image from photobook *tuska teens* 2022

While I consider my art practice in terms of being bound by neither sculpture or photography, through both these modes of expression I continue to explore hybrids and fusions of both

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<sup>247</sup> "Suicide & self-harm monitoring," Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2020, accessed January 15th, 2022, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/suicide-self-harm-monitoring/data/populations-age-groups/suicide-among-young-people>.

disciplines as they reveal themselves within making processes. The tactile dimension of the photobook shares an aesthetic sensibility with the sculptural but is also different from it in that experiencing the object as a collection of images requires both handling and care. Amongst the sculptural scatterings and symbols that offer glimpses into my children’s unique stories, so many photographic images also found their way into folders on the computer, like a digital archive trying to capture something of the sensibility of an old analogue family photo album. The images came from various sources such as SLR and medium format cameras, iPhones, social media platforms, drone images, and varied from staged to impromptu, from scanned slides to images captured as screenshots. This abundance of sources seemed to speak to the predominance of visual mediums in the adolescent experience of today’s contemporary world where the sheer number and frenzied dissemination of technological hypermedia in circulation feels like we are in danger of losing something of the mystic qualities of the visual image. Nicholas Carr in *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains* (2010) believes that such endless advancements in digital technologies and environments means “we are evolving from being cultivators of personal knowledge to being hunters and gatherers in the electronic data forest.”<sup>248</sup> Adopting the photobook format feels like mining this forest for the personal as a way of temporarily abrogating and slowing such processes so that connections to wider issues of adolescent encounters and stories in society, especially relatable to regional experiences, might have a chance to percolate.



Figure 40: Kerryn Sylvia, *Disorientations: Forest of Trees* 2022, medium format double-page image from photobook *tuska teens* 2022



Figure 41: Kerryn Sylvia, *Disorientations: House* 2021, drone double-page image from photobook *tuska teens* 2022

Recurring visions of old family photo albums kept dragging me into the reverie of books made for each of the children when they were babies. The care of keeping the preciousness of

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<sup>248</sup> Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains* (New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 2010), p.138.

moments, milestones, and memorabilia like locks of hair captured between the pages as keepsakes, the objects themselves dripping with mothering sentimentality. In defence of the feminisation of such quality's art historian Andrea Liss in her book *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (2009) writes of the maternal present within "loving actions and representations where sentimentality—to be understood as deep, intimate, and real feelings not limited to gender—is no longer a cultural embarrassment,"<sup>249</sup> or something to be trivialised. Instead Liss suggests a depth of embodied maternal knowledge that lies in such states of tenderness that are not mere self-indulgent passions, but legitimate expressions of the constant labours of mothering. She expresses a motherly fear of her young child one day growing up and leaving her as "living in anticipation of such an impending storm"<sup>250</sup> and making the photobook was a way of weathering the intimacies of such a storm, when the waiting is over, and the tumultuous atmospheric conditions have finally arrived.

In documenting such a succession of potentially transformative liminal adolescent moments, the photobook format explores ways in which attributes of the liminal phase might be drawn out to incorporate a multitude of moments and affective resonances. Researchers of adolescence Richard M. Dunham, Jeannie S. Kidwell, and Stephen M. Wilson in their journal article *Rites of Passage in Adolescence: A Ritual Process Paradigm* (1986) "relate rites of passage to the developmental process at adolescence,"<sup>251</sup> highlighting the use of experimental research techniques such as their expanded Ritual Process Paradigm (RPP) model. Making correlations between environmental events and developmental processes the authors hypothesise the possibilities and heuristic value in capturing an "accumulated wisdom concerning rites of passage...far more extended in time,"<sup>252</sup> through their proposed fourteen-step model.

Contributing to an overall greater sense of uncertainty and crisis are many more steps dancing around the main event of a rite, with the middle transition period expanded to include a process that goes through 4. new environmental demands, 5. liminality, 6. activation, 7. agony and 8. numinosity,<sup>253</sup> creating a greater sense of movement to conceptions and processes within liminality. I propose Dunham, Kidwell and Wilson's model expresses something more

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<sup>249</sup> Liss, *Feminist art and the maternal*, p.152.

<sup>250</sup> Liss, *Feminist art and the maternal*, p.146.

<sup>251</sup> Dunham, Kidwell, and Wilson, "Rites of Passage at Adolescence: A Ritual Process Paradigm," p.139.

<sup>252</sup> Dunham, Kidwell, and Wilson, "Rites of Passage at Adolescence: A Ritual Process Paradigm," p.151.

<sup>253</sup> Dunham, Kidwell, and Wilson, "Rites of Passage at Adolescence: A Ritual Process Paradigm," p.146.

postmodern and fractured about searching for psyche in our contemporary world and opens possibilities towards an imaginatively poetic depiction of rites sequenced as fragments and glimpses within a dynamism of liminal processes. They posit contemporary forms of ritual journey as something less supported, prescriptive, or orchestrated in explanation and identification than traditionally structured rites of passage, experienced instead as something more rupturing, fragmented or even accidental which connects closely with my own experiential derived research and practices of making.



Figure 42: *tuska teens* 2022, 52 pages, 26 x 21 cm, hardcover photobook. Self-published

The photobook offers opportunity to improvise with this more expanded flow of passage moments and strives to hold onto a sense of the vital energy and essence of both psychological and phenomenological experiences as they arise. Its development picks up on social and symbolic cues and behaviours, hinting at points of crisis and giving insights into the subjective experiences, and social dramas of individuals amidst a plethora of physical and cognitive changes. Spurred on by a condition of betweenness, feeling like you are “without the security

of an identity,”<sup>254</sup> the photobook focuses on the phase of liminality in this process as a non-linear narrative of moments, with something from each of my children’s unique experiences placed at various intervals between the pages. The production of the book reaches beyond ternary relations of rites and is reflective of stream of consciousness as a kind of constant becoming of moments, expanded into a multitude of glimpses or shifts developing throughout transitional experiences. Virginia Woolf’s novel *The Waves*<sup>255</sup> (1987) read during my adolescence resonates like a textual version of the contemporary photobook, where stream of consciousness in words flows with a similar rhythm of poetic nuances and imaginings.



Figure 43: *tuska teens* 2022, 52 pages, 26 x 21 cm, hardcover photobook, self-published

In *tuska teens* (2022) there is also a fragment of text contained within the pages that comes from the free dictionary Wiktionary in providing some insight into both the book's title and in acting as a kind of loosely connective tissue of patterning for the composition of still images isolated and dispersed throughout its pages.

Pictured in a suit made of rags, knots, clear plastic, and foraged from the humble materials of mundane life in my husband’s home-based window tinting business, a costumed figure

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<sup>254</sup> Dunham, Kidwell, and Wilson, "Rites of Passage at Adolescence: A Ritual Process Paradigm," p.143.

<sup>255</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Grafton Books, 1987).

expressive of the psychological tensions and struggles between what is inside and outside, exists as a series of shots scattered at certain intervals and in various states of relatability to the worn object throughout the photobook.



Figure 44: Kerryn Sylvia, *Untitled* 2022, digital image, double page spread, *tuska teens* 2022 photobook image



Figure 45: Kerryn Sylvia, *Shedding and Salting* 2021, single page spread, *tuska teens* 2022 photobook image

The costume in the image *Tuska Boy and the Salt of the Earth* (2021) clothes emotional disorientations, providing an unruly temporal skin for dimensions of liminal processes and operates out of an optative mood of unsettled feelings, the yet unknown and indeterminant. Anthropologist Victor Turner (1982) refers to as a subjunctive mood of maybe in “a world of ‘as if’”<sup>256</sup> ranging from hypothesis to fantasy. The images exist as markers of what I felt to be a particularity pertinent turning point in story of my eldest son’s adolescent journey, in that he was distanced from the family for a period, and now allowed himself to return and be clad in this object of hand stitching, tending, and mothering. To engage once again with his family in an excursion of experimentation with the “possibilities of form and meaning”<sup>257</sup> belonging to Turner’s ludic capacity for the serious work of play attempted through his formulations of comparative symbology.

<sup>256</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.83.

<sup>257</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.23.



Figure 46: Kerryn Sylvia, *Tuska Boy and the Salt of the Earth* 2021, digital print on paper 120 x 96cm and in *tuska teens* 2022 photobook image

## Softening tracks: practice

In adopting a manner of behaviour in the realm of the performative and indulgences of play, the location chosen for the photoshoot was also a site of significance in joining with a diversity of mutual translations in sensory codes and Turner's "symbolic modes"<sup>258</sup> of experiential crossovers, combinations, and connections. Located at Nowingi in the Murray Sunset National Park, its Salt Lake systems are approximately 45-kms outside of Mildura. For as many years as I can remember families have gone there to practice honing the art of flat track speedway on one saltpan around a small homemade track bordered by old tyres,



Figure 47: Kerry Sylvia, *Circling Psyche: Flat Track Practice* 2017, digital SLR image from tuska teens photobook 2022

This was my son's passion and something he was building his childhood identity around. He lived and breathed the sport, dreamed it too I am sure, with a desire to someday race speedway at an elite level and travel the world in pursuit of this ideal. Watching him *cut laps* for the last time in 2017, it became painfully obvious to me that he was growing too fast to sustain his dream. Anyone that made it in the sport was smaller framed and the bikes, with the way they are set up to ride, demanded a slightness of stature. I felt a strong pull towards trying

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<sup>258</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.17.

to soften the blow of this realisation for him. This was not going to go the way he imagined, and I was constricted by a knot of embodied sadness for the loss of his dream.

I had always had a tenuous relationship with the sport, and in mothering these experiences with him I would try to cope with my worry of such high speeds and possible impending danger by documenting the races and distancing myself from it through the lens of a camera. Still, it was a struggle to watch, with the anguish of injury or worse more overwhelming than any promise of victory. He was good at it, which meant moving up the ranks, getting more powerful bikes and going even faster, despite the fact the machines have no brakes. I watched other mothers around me who cheered for their children with intense enthusiasm, and I wondered about their own levels of anxiety, fear and even perhaps guilt - and knew I was not one of them.

### **Softening tracks: improvising and walking**

After my son had completed his repetition of practice laps spent perfecting the feel of line between boy and machine, I intuitively set out on the crudely made track to lay down my own marks. I walked the track as a symbolic action as many times as it took to feel present, as a gesture of love, containment, and acknowledgement that I was paying attention and going along with this experience in mutuality with the other. This work of the moment was a futile act in softening the harshness of this sense of loss for my son. In improvising with my own steps and his freshly imprinted tyre tracks on the salty, muddy earth, I felt as if I was covering them with an imagined patterning of motherly love. A simple gesturing action to my child that I was paying attention to his ordeal of impending uncertainty, of the death of this dream formed in the mind of his desires.



Figure 48: Kerryn Sylvia, *Walking View of Salted Motorcycle Tracks*, (video still), Nowingi Lakes, Victoria, 2017

In the book *The Art of Is: Improvising as a Way of Life* (2019), musician and author Stephen Nachmanovitch explains improvising as something that thrives on “the intimacies of human interaction, mutual support, and conflict that are carried by language, sound, and action” where everything presents itself in offer of interaction, “as an active participant in the moment.”<sup>259</sup> Further to this he ponders how and when to end moments of improvisation as one of its mysteries. Turner proposes such an ending might “at the point at which the 'threads ' either disappear into the 'context ' of some other 'event' or 'converge' to cause the occurrence of some

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<sup>259</sup> Nachmanovitch, *The Art of Is Improvising as a Way of Life*, p.151.

new ‘event.’”<sup>260</sup> He refers to this as a kind of tracing operation of threads identified in terms of their impact and influence on ensuing events, linked together like a metaphorical chain that he believes to be neglected in terms of “establishing connexity between the different levels of a narrative structure”<sup>261</sup> and the significant role that symbols play. The video *Softening Tracks* (2017-2022) calls attention to the dynamics of such experiential processes at play in familial and social life, where improvised connectives, precariously entangled with the vulnerabilities of others, are affecting, and felt or prehended through such overlays of symbolic action.

### **Soften tracks: reflections on a nocturnal journey**

I wonder now about what intuited me to start walking that day, to thrust my partner the iPhone and start filming. My family remained curious but complied to my request as I attempted to create some experience of sacred space out of the situation arising and in response a physical call to action as part of the physics of things. Upon reflection, I feel the impulse to mark the moment had something to do with my own tale of adolescent crisis that has become a revelatory life moment born out of first-person experience. Within this unplanned nocturnal rite of passage journey I discovered something more creative and alive about myself in relationship with the world and this was sensed as a kind of liberation or movement from former perceptions about who I thought I was and an excitement for who I might become. This was a moment when I experienced a perceptible psychological shift or transformation in my own unique story and felt an essence in it of something evolving or emerging, even if I could not rationally make sense of it. Occurring around the same age as my own child was when throwing his motorbike around the saltpan on that day, the first frames of grainy footage taken some five years earlier on now already outdated iPhone technology allowed me to react to some prehension of an impending shift arising for him. It enabled me to sense something beginning to tear, perforate, and rupture, gently opening or metaphorically bubbling up from somewhere beneath or inside.

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<sup>260</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.64.

<sup>261</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.65.



Figure 49: Kerry Sylvia, *Softening Tracks* (film still 33secs), 2017-2022, 10m 36sec. drone footage courtesy of Daniel Sylvia, video link <https://youtu.be/wsQjKaZuT3A>

Psychotherapist Matt Licata in his book *A Healing space: Befriending ourselves in difficult times* (2020) proposes a variety of doorways in our lives that lead us into challenging experiences and a rite of passage offers one such approach for connecting with the depth, creativity, and potential for meaning making mediated through such experiences. Rites of passage events assist in working with the narratives we hold and transform in the process of making sense of our lives and of shifting our perceptions and relations with ourselves, others, and the world. There is a sacredness in these embodied experiences. An aliveness of the mind that Licata aligns with forms of creative and “imaginal work rather than merely cognitive or thought based,” maintaining that in a sense we are called to update the narrative of our lives, to mine “the richness and unique landscape of our own subjectivity and radical uniqueness,”<sup>262</sup> essential to our spiritual journeys. Perceived as an in-between territory of experiential navigation and extremes, Licata writes of it as a kind of sacred middle that we must train ourselves to recognise, engage and enter relational attunement with. The action of walking can be considered as a strategy for sensing the impending middle or liminal passage of adolescence, throwing up challenges to my mothering impulses of protection and care after so many years of learning to cultivate and become comfortable with these actions and my feminine role of learned sensibilities and intuitions. I am grateful that I can call on a reference

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<sup>262</sup> Licata, *A Healing Space: Befriending Ourselves in Difficult Times*, p.141.

point of personal experience which helps to soften the moment and call into action an embodied gesture of response for the mysteries and possibilities of impending difficult times, and as a way of meeting and making way for new possibilities to emerge. I walk as a humble gesture of love I can offer that acknowledges and shares in the impending sense of this loss and gradual erosion of the known and familiar for my child.

## Nocturnal liminality

In *The Red Book* (2009), written between 1915 and 1930, Carl Jung states “if no outer adventure happens to you, then no inner adventure happens to you either...In the adventure I witnessed what I had experienced in the Mysterium,”<sup>263</sup> and something of this numinous concept remains with me from my own adolescent nocturnal journey. Within this living form of experience even the night can be considered symbolically significant and is theorised by philosopher Catherine Clément in her book *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture* (1994) as a psychological syncope with its own logic, “the logic of nighttime; it is a different logic, one of syncope. A liberated logic.”<sup>264</sup> She expresses her concern that the social order of today limits crossings and diverts energy away from this liberated logic of “passing through the darkness of initiation,”<sup>265</sup> with the outcome of our current drives towards continuous thought and productive activity leaving the senses little or no place to shelter. Thought of in this way, the night or dark becomes a necessity of the poetic and the timelessness of syncope which as Clément explains “seems to accomplish a miraculous suspension”<sup>266</sup> and manipulation of time, much like poetry music and dance do. Further to this such elements and actions hold potential towards providing a ground for awakening to the inner world, capable of generating a renewed sense of meaning and purpose.

I recall the experience of this nocturnal liminality as a feeling of something greater than myself holding me, being held by its presence, and touching the mystery of its life force. It made me feel awake to the world and its possibilities. The subtle quickening and resonance of excitement in all matter and substance seemed to override the palpable fear and uncertainty of the moment. My spirit of adventure was aroused, and the distance between the arising

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<sup>263</sup> C. G Jung, *The Red Book Liber Novus*, trans. Mark Kyburz, John Peck, and Sonu Shamdasani (New York: Norton and Company 2009), p.263.

<sup>264</sup> Clément, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture*, p.24.

<sup>265</sup> Clément, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture*, p.24.

<sup>266</sup> Clément, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture*, p.5.

experience and my future desires felt condensed within my mind's magnanimity. It allowed me to journey with intent and embrace the tensions of the situation I was thrust into, encountering a spatial area of social limbo outside the routines of daily life that was uncomfortable and ambiguous, but also rich with potential. It forced me to stretch my faith and widen my relationship with the world and I returned home knowing something had irreversibly changed and from it I could never return. Jung writes, "therefore I behold death, since it teaches me how to live,"<sup>267</sup> and I liken my encounter to a symbolic form of death as a necessity for such a sense of the transformative to occur. Something of this experience has also created in me an intimate relationship with the unknown, whereby my intuition responds to the relational world with an artistic and imaginal sensibility, and it is interesting to think that through this experience art and I found each other. In reference to Clément's work of syncope she suggests that an artist's routine is one between worlds whereby "in the midst of the continuing order of things, the artist is a *casualty of time*...This is the artist mindset: indifferent to the eyes of the world, but highly sensitive to all differences in his interior world that gives rise to a new apparition."<sup>268</sup> It is through a combination of the practice of mothering, my own rite of passage experience and this artistic mindset that I can sense the first stirrings of my child's moment of unconscious leanings towards struggle and change...and so I walk.

### **Softening tracks: futurities (the work of walking and breathing)**

Time has passed as I return to Lake Nowingi to commence walking and capture new footage to continue the video work *Softening Tracks* (2017-2022). The action is now loaded with the experiential, with memories and resonances of the many struggles and difficulties encountered along the way (drugs, car crashes, police, leaving home), all now part of a collective of affective moments sensed and shared psychologically, physically, ritualistically, and intensely. Licata explains that "psychological inquiry invites us into embodied intimacy with our experience...to care deeply about what we are experiencing, to be willing to get messy...to enter into the body and the heart and take the risk to see what is there."<sup>269</sup> This continuum in the work of walking brings up a myriad of reflective questions within this mess of experiences and I try to still them. I want to be emotionally and physically present, but I am still only practicing, a novice.

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<sup>267</sup> Jung, *The Red Book Liber Novus*, p.275.

<sup>268</sup> Clément, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture*, p.238.

<sup>269</sup> Licata, *A Healing Space: Befriending Ourselves in Difficult Times*, p.161.



Figure 50: Kerry Sylvania, *Softening Tracks* (film still), 2017-2022, 10m 36sec. drone footage courtesy of Daniel Sylvania, Video link <https://youtu.be/wsQjKaZuT3A>

The questions break through and fill my head. Was I there enough for each of them in the way they needed? Did I give them what they needed to become at home in their own bodies? If I sense a lack of bodily psychosomatic collusion in any one of them can reinvention and ritualisation of their experiences through objects and actions be enough to allow them to return from such states of anti-structure and formlessness? Are my mothering actions enough? Am I a good enough at mothering? Is there some way of knowing? Focusing on walking, walking with purpose, walking with intent, I am struggling to quell the questions and become fully embodied in the action of the present. In walking the track, I am also responding through my body to the monotony of some other long-forgotten periods of intense presence and holding, of the repetition and consistency that mothering seems to demand when the children are young, and of a subjunctive mood of mothering that requires a continual hovering around the edges and buffering the needs of others.

In walking I exhale deeply, carrying along the forward propulsion of life, its doing, its drive towards futurity. I experience a heightened attention to breathing in inhalations too, gathering and preparing, the pauses between them reminders of liminal intervals; the pauses between breaths that hold the processes of breathing together. I fall into rhythm with this breath and its mingling with the salty smelling wind as my steps circle round the track, focusing attention on the tyre imprints that are still there on the ground, now a collaboration of practice from many other young boys and their flat track speedway dreams. My own footprints engage with them, crunching the salt and entangling our marks, our experiences coalescing.

Ingold in his essay 'On Breath and Breathing: A Concluding Comment' (2020) suggests that breath "retains a kind of poetic resonance"<sup>270</sup> consubstantial with thinking and doing, so that the soul breaths and the self is embodied. To understand it like this, I imagine walking with the breath of soul,<sup>271</sup> intensely immersed in the action and attentive to its temporal futurity of becoming liminalities encountered and still to yet to arise. As I walk there is a desire to hold things in place, to hold back time, to shield and protect. This constricting sense of dread and worry, (could it be mothering guilt again?) these sensations begin to dissipate and are absorbed into the landscape and simplicity of doing, of action, of mothering. Ingold tells us that "inhalation gathers and prepares, while exhalation carries the forward propulsion of life, its 'doing'" and in walking I become engaged in these operations of doing and breathing. Walking becomes breathing and breathing becomes walking, and in the fusion of both I gain a sense of engagement within ritualised actions of improvisation as discussed by ritual theorist Ronald L. Grimes in his book *Endings in Ritual Studies* (2020) where he argues against ritual staying exclusively within the realms of hierarchical dogma, tradition, and prescription. Grimes maintains that "like it or not, ritual improvisation happens, sometimes by accident, sometimes as an act of resistance or renewal"<sup>272</sup> and contemporary forms are about practicing attentiveness and responsivity towards contingencies and unexpected situations, making do with what is at hand. He believes that "improvisation begins with a diffuse receptivity to what is transpiring in the moment. By joining the flow of action rather than blocking it, you become vulnerable to others and the environment,"<sup>273</sup> and as I walk this sense of shared vulnerability

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<sup>270</sup> Tim Ingold, "On Breath and Breathing: A Concluding Comment " *Body & Society* 26, no. 2 (June 2020): p.165, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X20916001>.

<sup>271</sup> Ingold, "On Breath and Breathing: A Concluding Comment " p.165.

<sup>272</sup> Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies*, p.6.

<sup>273</sup> Grimes, *Endings in Ritual Studies*, p.18.

and mutuality of felt receptivity flows through the action like a gentle reminder of the depth of connections and intimacies that exist between all things.

## **Mothering salt and shadows**

Iterations of the costume from the image *Tuska Boy and the Salt of the Earth* (2021) find their home in the photobook, but also through other imaginative configurations such as the experimental work installed as part of the Castlemaine State Festival (2021). Housed in the iconic Castlemaine Market Building with its atmospheric light and classic Georgian architecture the installation of work for *Tuska Boy and Meraki mother* (2021) cascaded down the centre of the space, reflective of film stills printed onto fabric and responsive to ways that seemingly simple subject matter can elicit layered and complex narratives. This topological approach to documentation of subtle fluid changes within a sequence of improvised actions, is dominated by the consistency of the environment with its salted patterning of lines, colours, and textures. Captured from an aerial perspective and installed in the space on low plinths, the viewer shares in this experience of perspective in having to look down on them and engage in a ritualised form of slow walking along their length to take in the poetics of the action.

The work for *Tuska Boy and Meraki Mother* (2021) grew out of a series of images examining and imagining the crossovers and entanglements between liminal adolescent passages and actions of mothering within familial life. Captured at the end of the day of filming for the video *Softening Tracks* (2017-2022) the images were an afterthought, an improvised response of gratitude to my son for coming back out to Nowingi and allowing me to capture something of our entanglements in experiences across the past five years.



Figure 51: Kerry Sylvia, *Tuska Boy and Meraki Mothering* (installation views), 2021, rag costume, prints on fabric x 8 62 x 48cm each, framed digital image 10 x15cm, plinths, metal stand. Castlemaine Market Building, Castlemaine State Festival

Shedding the hot and heavy costume his limited patience with the process of capturing photos and footage for the day was at an end. But the long shadows cast by the late afternoon sun seemed to call me to action once again and with my husband flying the drone, I composed the series of images in my mind and relayed them to him to orchestrate the drama of these loosely imagined actions. I lay the discarded and empty, but nonetheless still symbolic costume on the pinkish, encrusted ground, alchemical ideas of salt and shadows dancing in my imagination and inspiring a sense of playful possibilities through actions of mothering and attempts at holding or befriending the shadow side of things.

Along with personal connections of practice and care there is also a certain and peculiar enchantment to this landscape and thoughts of the alchemical magic of salt, with its remedial and transformational properties, the sting of its bitterness and ability to sanitise wounds belonging to the imaginal reality metaphorical associations. Jungian psychoanalyst Stanton Marlan in the book *C.G Jung and the Alchemical Imagination: Passages into the Mysteries of*

*Psyche and Soul* (2021) reflects on salt and its connections to genres of depth and alchemical psychology as a ubiquitous and “essential principle of the human soul,”<sup>274</sup> drawing forth ideas that carry initiatory significance. He writes of salt in terms of its seasoning capacity and flavouring essence in calling forth unique approaches to its importance as a substance and driver of a metaphorically shared and “continued appearance in various cultures, across time and distance.”<sup>275</sup> Psychologist James Hillman also refers to the metaphorical qualities of the substance in his essay ‘The Suffering of Salt’ (2010) creating a model that requires an awareness towards qualities of human life such as our characters, psychic natures, and physical bodies with a sensitivity to “the microcosm/macrocosm and the doctrine of correspondences between them.”<sup>276</sup> Hillman’s psychic material of salt belongs to the soft edges of alchemical interpretation, inclusive of our inner life where even stinging “dried-out moments are not contingent and accidental, they are of our substance and essence.”<sup>277</sup>

Hillman’s salty stuff of psyche and suffering events are sensed and felt, entangled with other substances and contaminants where our wounds, or hurts, and marks of trauma become like soluble and purgative salt mines of common experience that we work with. The saltpan I work with gives me a sense of being grounded or earthed within a tangible commonality and susceptibility to human struggles and losses. Here the costume acts as symbolic container for the psychological and spiritual heroics, the aesthetic highs of adolescence. Hillman admonishes that when the integration and integrity of personality and character has not been adequately salted, we discover this sophic substance is what “is especially missing in young people”<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Stanton Marlan, *C. G. Jung and the Alchemical Imagination: Passages into the Mysteries of Psyche and Soul* (Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2021), p.81.

<sup>275</sup> Marlan, *C. G. Jung and the Alchemical Imagination: Passages into the Mysteries of Psyche and Soul*, p.82.

<sup>276</sup> James. Hillman, "The Suffering of Salt," in *Alchemical Psychology: Uniform Edition of the Writings of James Hillman* (Putnam, Conn: Spring Publications, Inc., 2010), p.56.

<sup>277</sup> Hillman, "The Suffering of Salt," p.55.

<sup>278</sup> Hillman, "The Suffering of Salt," pp.68-69.



Figure 52: Kerryn Sylvia, *Tuska Boy and Meraki Mothering* (installation view), 2021 (R) and close-up detail of print in found frame with oval wooden mount board 10 x 15cm (L), Castlemaine Market Building, Castlemaine State Festival

Within this topology of actions, the reference in the title to the Greek work ‘meraki’ is my own attempt to rescue it from the contemporary commodification of shop fronts, wellness salons, and IT companies in renewing it as something more meaningfully connected to personal family history and ancestral connections. Urban Dictionary describes it as “doing something with soul, creativity, or love – when you put ‘something of yourself’ into what you’re doing, whatever it may be.”<sup>279</sup> Processes of Meraki Mothering are at work in this series of images which imagines entanglements between the entities of object, person, and shadow in a mereologically dynamic interplay of physical environment, psychological states, and symbolic gestures towards the psychological states of others. Marlan (2021) builds on Jung’s formulations of the shadow which posit facing the shadow and coming to terms with the darkness of the unconscious calling into question illusions about self in the maintenance of personal identity. Shadow processes can be painful and confronting, acting like points of rupture and trauma and revealing in the larger personality as undeveloped and unacceptable. But they are also potentials for further development, part of a dynamic process that helps form part of the psyche that emerges and erupts in consciousness, in dreams, as projections, seeking confrontations and challenges while remaining, as Marlan suggests “essential to the wholeness of psychic life.”<sup>280</sup>

<sup>279</sup> whatevenwhat, "Meraki," (August 6th 2017, online: Urban Dictionary, January 5th 2022).

<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Meraki>.

<sup>280</sup> Marlan, C. G. *Jung and the Alchemical Imagination: Passages into the Mysteries of Psyche and Soul*, p.139.

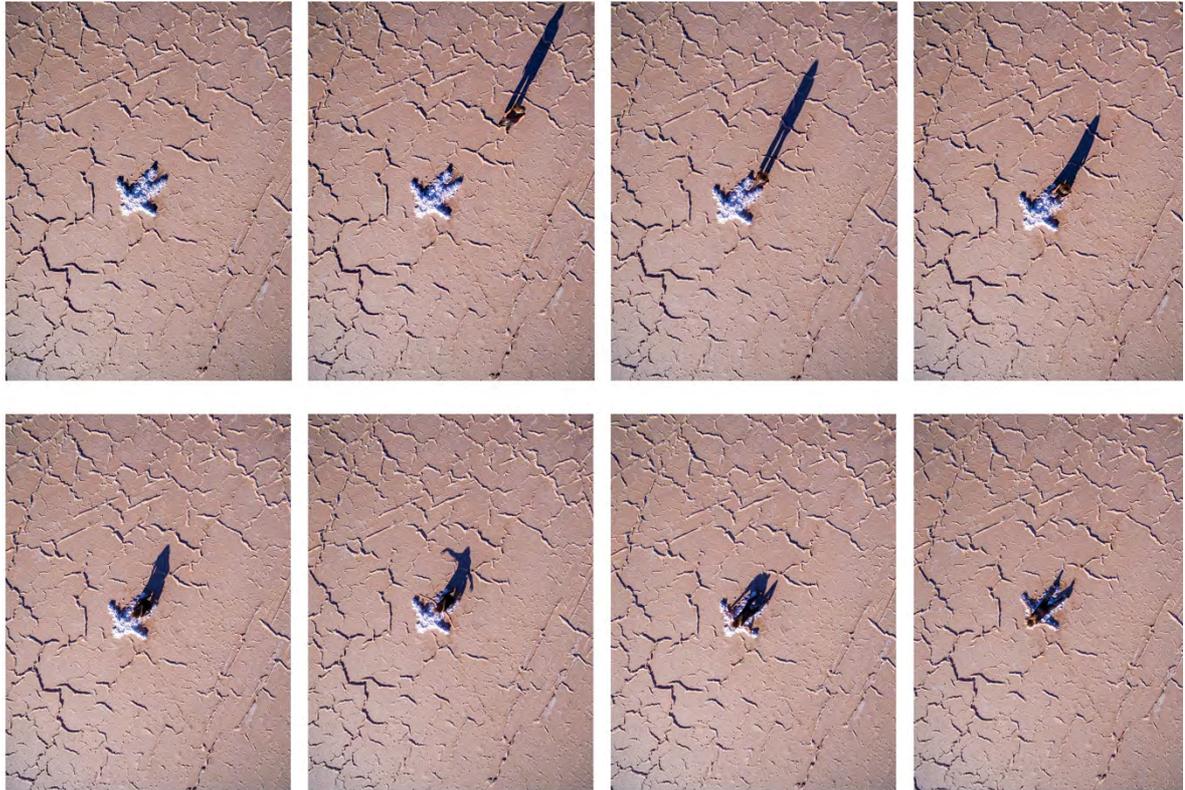


Figure 53: Kerryn Sylvia, *Tuska Boy and Meraki Mothering* 2021, digital prints, shadow performance and sequencing layout

Often conceived in the alchemical imagination as a metaphorical costume or mask, it is related to the persona which when not engaged in actions of adaptation and conformity is thought to get lost in, deny, split off or repress aspects of the larger personality. In honouring and offering some motion towards the dynamics of development within these spiritual and psychological forms of work, I try prolonging the primordial shadow of my son. It is like I am a double shadow in these images, in my actual late afternoon shadow cast on the ground, and as a black clad, embodied shadow character of mothering intent. My wish is to cover and metaphorically hold something of the essence of imagined rag boy in place just a little longer, to shield something of this symbolic death to which I also feel enmeshed in the emotion and loss of. There is a sense of softening the journey and allowing him just a little more time to dwell within liminality, believing a Marlan tells us, that this “can lead to renewal and the opening to a deepened symbolic life.”<sup>281</sup>

<sup>281</sup> Marlan, *C. G. Jung and the Alchemical Imagination: Passages into the Mysteries of Psyche and Soul*, p.139.

*Tuska Boy and Meraki Mothering* (2021) was reprised again for the *Phyllis Palmer Gallery* at La Trobe University Bendigo. This time the fabric prints were pinned to the wall, embracing their materiality of gentle drapes, falls, and the casting of their own shadows on the wall adding another dimension and layer to the energy to the works. Installed in this way they also responded to more cross-cultural framings of Buddhist and Western philosophical traditions of fluidity and movement related to developmental concepts of persona, personality, identity, and self.



Figure 54: Kerry Sylvia, *Tuska Boy and Meraki Mothering* (detail), 2021, digital images on fabric, rag costume, framed digital image, Phyllis Palmer Gallery, image courtesy of Lisa Guzzardi, La Trobe University

### **Softening tracks: transitional diffractions**

Returning to the making of the video *Softening Tracks* (2017-2022) the aerial perspective and play of environment, mothering actions, costume, salt, and shadow are also a focus of the poetic visuals of filmic sequences now with the inclusion and perhaps much overused and cliqued transitional trope of overlaid diffraction patterns between connecting shots. Sociologist Jessica Smartt Gullion states her book *Diffractional Ethnography: Social Sciences*

and the *Ontological Turn* (2018) that it is through an engaged practice of participation, interactions, and immersion in “a particular slice of the social world”<sup>282</sup> that ethnographers attempt to understand the dynamism and variabilities of lived experience. She suggests the body of the ethnographer to be like a data sieve, absorbing and reconfiguring empirical sensory information and inviting a “material engagement with the world”<sup>283</sup> as a tangle of actants and forces, to create something new. Smartt Gullion’s description of the role of the ethnographer seems to encapsulate something at play in my own art making practice, where entanglements of memory, the empirical and poetic are informed by occurrences of liminality within social life and their capacity towards opening and supporting momentary transformative interstices of initiation into a sense of who we are.



Figure 55: Kerry Sylvia, *Softening Tracks* 2017-2022 video film stills with transitions and diffraction, Liminal 2022 exhibition, Mildura Arts Centre, video link <https://youtu.be/wsOjKaZuT3A>

Like an embedded mapping of crossovers and flows, memories of my own adolescent experience of crisis rite informs those unfolding for my adolescent children, diffractively colouring my impressions and attempts at authentically marking something of their unique journeys through the disorientating passages of liminal potentialities. In using my own nocturnal adolescent experience as a touchstone of diffractive memories regarding transformational life moments, I come to a belief that possibilities towards spiritual inquiry, the sacred and wonder coalesce and hold a potential to operate from within such adolescent liminal thresholds, where senses and emotions are heightened and questions of identity challenged. Smartt Gullion argues for a multidisciplinary enfolding within the creative complexities of all forms of coexistence, embracing a world of “differences, diffractions, and

<sup>282</sup> Jessica Smartt Gullion, *Diffractive Ethnography: Social Sciences and the ontological Turn* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), p.95.

<sup>283</sup> Gullion, *Diffractive Ethnography: Social Sciences and the ontological Turn*, p.96.

entanglements”<sup>284</sup> that decentres what it is to be human and embraces an ontological turn towards transitional borderlands of alterity that emerge from such in-between spaces. She maintains that these are not easy to occupy as they emerge from “the messiness of contradictions...Ideas and realities bleed, they burst, they come undone, and reform, rematerialize, become into new assemblages.”<sup>285</sup> They represent, as Turner explains “the indeterminacy that lurks in the cracks and crevices of all socio-cultural “constructions of reality.””<sup>286</sup>



Figure 56: Kerry Sylvia, *Car Cocoon: Love and Other Collisions #II* 2022, sculpture with diffraction projection, Liminal 2022 exhibition, Mildura Arts Centre

In making the familiar strange and dealing with the fuzziness of things the aberrations and aesthetic qualities of diffractive (bokeh), transition effects are also put to work as a projection emanating from the sculptural front end of the car body in *Car Cocoon: Love and Other Collisions #2* (2022). The subjunctive mood of the limen or threshold dances within interpretations of this play of colour and light that oscillates disorientating between sensations of a dance party and the intensities of a symbolically optical form of car crash.

Donna Haraway in *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.Femaleman\_Meets\_Oncomouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (2018) uses an alternative metaphorical explanation for the phenomenon of diffraction as a way of gaining insights into how psychological processes of memory and attending responsively map the materially derived encounters of entangled relationships. Thought of in this way my past memory of adolescent crisis and passage is used not as a reflection, but as a form of diffractive narrative where entanglements of intersubjectivities from the past and the present moment coalesce. This I envisage as a kind of

<sup>284</sup> Gullion, *Diffractive Ethnography: Social Sciences and the ontological Turn*, p.19.

<sup>285</sup> Gullion, *Diffractive Ethnography: Social Sciences and the ontological Turn*, p.30.

<sup>286</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.77.

loving and more subtle mothering vision of mapping mattering, that emerges out of Haraway’s suggestion of necessity for a third term or third birthing place where a composition of “interference patterns can make a difference in how meanings are made and lived.”<sup>287</sup> This place of hypertensions hovers shimmeringly around the periphery of dominant Western narratives where intersubjectivity and memory are explored through mindful attendance to the entanglements of relational experiences, the shapes and forms that arise from artistic processes of symbolic reinvention, and between mothering actions and adolescent passages of liminality. The responsibility of the messiness and complexities at play in our lived experiences and heterogeneous histories is shared within such expanded material boundaries and dimensions, whereby the imaginary is informed both through engagement with the experiences of others and through my own sense of diffractive memory stories.

### Softening tracks: twangs and tinkering’s (Soundscape)

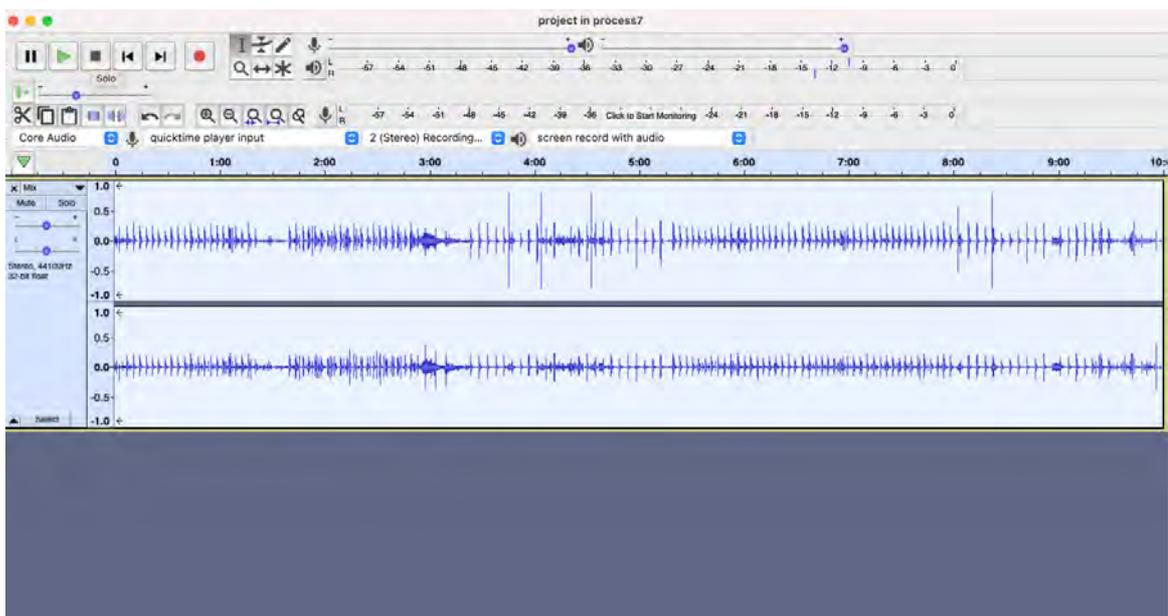


Figure 57: Kerry Sylvia, *Twangs and Tinkerings* 2022, ambient soundscape for installation space and video work *Softening Tracks* 2022

The final dimension of the video *Softening tracks* (2017-2022) is an ambient soundscape composed of noises that emanated from the objects and materials used as an improvisational by-product of some of the works for the exhibition *Liminal* (2022). In the studio I became

<sup>287</sup> Donna Haraway, *Modest Witness@Second Millennium.FemaleMan Meets OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*, Second edition.. ed. (New York, London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), p.14.

aware of the objects I was playing with and their unique capacities as vibrating matter. My first engagement with the sounds was quite by accident when I plucked a string of fishing line holding up the car sculpture in the studio one evening as I left the room. I continued to do this every time I entered or left the building for a period until it began to feel like a daily ritual, and this set me on a course of improvising with and testing the potential for making sounds within other elements of the work also. Along with the twangs of the strings that all emitted their own unique frequencies, the piles of different shaped knots cast in plaster also had their own individual tones as they tinkered together. The off casts of tape rolls used in the production of the car sculpture, when stretched with tissue paper and sealed with latex, became like sacred little drums also with their own hollow rumbles and percussion sounds.



Figure 58: Kerryn Sylvia, *Illuminated Glimpses Between Shadow and Light* (installation view) 2022, fabric, objects, lights, latex, tissue paper, tape rolls



Figure 59: Kerryn Sylvia, *Illuminated Glimpses Between Shadow and Light* (detail) 2022, fabric, objects, lights, latex, tissue paper, tape rolls

Paying attention to these sensations of tone and pitch that the sculptural objects emitted was a way of knowing something of them sensorially as well as visually and feeling how sound activates another sense of audition towards nuances of lyrical improvisation and depth at play in the lights and darks of noises and sounds. Philosopher Michel Serres in *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (2008) discusses noise as one of the senses our social

relationship has changed with over time, in that we have lost something of our sense of sound in relation to our bodies and the natural world. He suggests that within a mingled body of senses, natural and bodily sounds have been overtaken by human sounds with a constant chatter of language dominating and polluting other forms of noise that we have lost contact with in our contemporary Western societies. In the noises from these objects, I heard possibilities for spiritual reconnection and renewal with these lost sounds. They activated something inside that triggered a recognition of another way of sense making through unfamiliar and unstable liminal passages. Serre's suggests "the fleeting given becomes audible"<sup>288</sup> in remaining open to moments when the observed world might be taken in so that the reason of language might be temporarily silenced from its riotous noise.

*Twangs and Tinkerings* (2022) also become a separate soundscape, slowed down to half the speed to further confound the familiarity of the noises and their rhythms. I have always felt the power of sound as capable of creating otherworldly associations, impinging on consciousness so that they might articulate something of the openness and chaos of experience. If Serre's is right and we have lost something of our connections with sensations in the body then it is my hope the soundscape, through an engagement with other relational intimacies of movement, gesture, shadows, objects, story, and pattern, might fill the exhibition space with a dynamic interplay of atmospheric experiences in conveying something deeper than words about the ambiguous, ambivalent, and subjunctive moods and immersions of liminal space. This is an idea supported by anthropologist Edith Turner in *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* (2012) connecting music with the phenomenon of flow states. She speculates that a characteristic of sound lies in its potential to hold and inspire transformational openings or shifts to different planes of consciousness, and in so doing it "provides a clean path to spirituality, and allows the spirit language to enter it easily"<sup>289</sup> Sound as a mode of perception has its own energy and power and the soundscape *Twangs and Tinkerings* (2022) plays with the improvisational and spiritual as a part of the whole within an atmosphere of liminal moods and experiences.

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<sup>288</sup> Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (London, New York: Continuum, 2008), p.88.

<sup>289</sup> Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* p.49.

## DIY drug paraphernalia



Figure 60: Tending to *Illuminating Shadow Objects* 2022, (before and after), images courtesy of Jack Sylvia

Of course, not everyone in my family were able to be as open and attentive to the unfolding drama of the church space with its disorientations and revolutionary potential towards newness. It was not as visible as a zone of potential and creative antistructure for other members of the extended family who were more heavily impacted by the uncertainty and unorthodoxy emanating from the space and viewed it more as a nest of rebellion. In her book *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures* (1999) feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz alludes to the unsettling and unfamiliar aspect of the new that lurks everywhere, especially where it is least able to be called by that label.”<sup>290</sup> For other family members, amidst the growing depths of uncontrollable and unregulated activities inside the shipping container, this lurking force of newness was perceived as a “disconcerting idea of unpredictable transformation-mutation...with implications or consequences that cannot be known in advance.”<sup>291</sup> There is a balancing act at play within such potential sites of change, between what Grosz describes as “commitments to upholding the values of predictability and stability” [and] “commitments that revel in the idea of the unpredictable.”<sup>292</sup> Approaching what was taking place through artistic means and methods was a way of constituting a greater sense of intersubjective and psychological intimacy with the drama and instability, while also maintaining an awareness for my own responsibility of mothering as a practice of caring, inclusive of all the emergent entanglements and ruptures along the way. Collecting images for

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<sup>290</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, "Thinking the New: Of Futures Yet Unthought," in *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures* ed. Elizabeth Grosz (United States of America: Cornell University Press, 1999), p.16.

<sup>291</sup> Grosz, "Thinking the New: Of Futures Yet Unthought," p.17.

<sup>292</sup> Grosz, "Thinking the New: Of Futures Yet Unthought," p.17.

the photobook became another form of attentiveness and attunement to the psychological dimensions of such liminal passages of adolescent crisis and finding expressions for the emotional and affective resonances of its intimate geographies and events.

One of Turner's aims in theorising the liminal phase of a crisis rite was in striving to keep it a free and experimental region of culture, a region through which new elements, symbols, and constructions of combinatory rules might be introduced.<sup>293</sup> This was a phase supporting the possibility of transformation for its own sake and acknowledging that societal structures are not natural but made, bestowing on us agency towards challenging and changing ourselves as evolving human beings. After the initial shock of first encountering these objects, which were obviously home-made bongos, applying this sense of newness and freedom to the phenomenon of gradually disappearing hose lengths, and scatterings of DIY drug paraphernalia around the backyard slowly took hold as expressions of a contemporary form of rite or ritual in adolescence. There were twelve homemade bongos gathered in all, although the first few took me by surprise and ended up in the rubbish bin. The objects held a certain ingenuity and do-it-yourself ethos, fashioned out of a combination of empty rubbish containers, functional objects, precious inherited glassware, vases, wax, Blu Tack, and garden hoses. Whether I liked it or not, the objects belonged to the ongoing story of what I felt to be my child's unique rite of passage journey, and I recall the rhythm and lyrics to contemporary R&B song by Khalid, *Young Dumb & Broke*<sup>294</sup> (2017) flowing through my head like a mantra during this period of harvesting the objects, the sound of which is still embedded within the process of confiscating, collecting, and casting the objects even now.

Following an improvisational impulse to document the objects photographically *Shadow Projection Objects: Bongos from the Backyard* (2019-2020) became a central image in the design of the photobook *tuska teens* (2022) and elevates them from objects belonging to the order of rubbish, the dirty and grotesque. Subjected to studio lighting they take on a quality of portraiture in capturing something about the construction of their unique materials, configurations, and characteristics. Nachmanovitch suggests that "learning to be a better improviser goes hand in hand with learning to be a better human being, because both are contingent on communicating with others, remaining open to surprise,"<sup>295</sup> and in adopting this

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<sup>293</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.28.

<sup>294</sup> Khalid, "Young Dumb & Broke," in *American Teen* (USA: Right Hand, RCA, 2017).

<sup>295</sup> Nachmanovitch, *The Art of Is Improvising as a Way of Life*, p.150.

extemporised, generative mode of working with the objects, I felt better able to contact the ambivalence of tensions that they projected as objects of both curiosity and concern.

In mothering the bong situation, I did not seem to have adequate answers apart from staying attentive to, and imaginatively working with these experiences through artistic processes and methods. Rather than trying to control and make judgement, I strived to remain open and affectively attuned to the situation at hand, to understand events as an enmeshing of relational attachments and entanglements. Plotkin (2008) suggests a deficit in the embodiment of teenage wholeness in Western societies that suffers from a lack of cultural and holistic practices to support “the unfulfilled and utterly natural longing to directly experience the mysteries of life.”<sup>296</sup> Among drug-taking teens, such wholeness deficits respond to a lack of variety in accessing this normative feature of teenage life, leading to behaviours that often have nothing to do with the drug abuse at all. Plotkin further contends “altering consciousness and exploring the mysteries of nature and psyche” to be a dimension that contemporary societies tend to neglect and outlines a more integrated and holistic approach to teen drug use over prevention and reactive treatments including, simply “telling teens to ‘just say no.’”<sup>297</sup> Instead, he proposes exposing teens to a greater variety of unstructured experiences with nature and the wilderness that address “among other things, instruction in effective and suitable methods for altering consciousness and exploring the mysteries of nature and psyche,”<sup>298</sup> without which the creation of subsocieties becomes an inadequate alternative to parents and mentors, where “some teenagers react...sometimes through substance addictions,”<sup>299</sup> and other anti-social or rebellious behaviours.

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<sup>296</sup> Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul*, p.22.

<sup>297</sup> Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul*, p.22.

<sup>298</sup> Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul*, p.22.

<sup>299</sup> Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul*, p.220.



Figure 61: Kerryn Sylvia, *Shadow Projection Objects: Bongs from the Backyard* 2019-2020 double-page spread, digital photograph from photobook *tuska teens* 2022

## Contemporary ludic symbols

Representative of such rebellious behaviours related to the taboo topic of drug use and youth in society, this collection of DIY homemade bongs gradually began inviting possibilities for symbolic reinvention as fragments of stories that marked experiences. Through the slow processes of casting and wrapping I developed a ritualistic sense of mindful attendance to the objects from which some form of careful mending or reparation began to emerge. It was as if my actions of making were holding or contained the rhythm of my own ritualised way of attending in empathetic communication to the experiences attached to them, reducing capacity for more reactive responses. Turner writes of the play of liminality where contemporary ludic “symbol vehicles – sensorily perceptible forms”<sup>300</sup> emerge out of the construction of novelty and cultural elements, and the original cobbled together construction of the bongs projected something of the freshness he attaches to the recombination of objects and events as potentially and symbolically multivocal.

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<sup>300</sup> Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology," p.27.

Nachmanovitch offers an alternative to deeply ingrained cultural psychological tenets of reward, control, and punishment in coming back to a practice and patience of mindfulness through simple gestures like finger kissing. He proposes this action as “a radical, transformative practice...in the immense moment-to-moment labour of learning and evolution”<sup>301</sup> with the power to transcend more reactive behaviours of judgement made around perceived the failures and mistakes of others. Treating the homemade bongs depicted in *Shadow Projection Objects: Bongs from the Backyard*, (2019-2020) to processes of casting and wrapping seemed to encapsulate something of this transformative sense of “kissing your fingers.”<sup>302</sup> Sometimes we really don’t feel like cheering when certain situations incite uncomfortable feelings like uncertainty, guilt, and worry, but Nachmanovitch maintains that in doing something, even within simple actions, we might arrive at possibilities towards staying attentive, empathetic and without judgement, opening towards the possibilities of these experiences “where improvisation in life and art meets our daily experience.”<sup>303</sup>

## **Mummifying actions**

Compelled to stay with the adolescent forms of risky and unpredictable play emanating from the interior of the shipping container, engaging with the objects was a way of exploring a necessity for doing that overshadowed knowing what shape or form the actions would eventually take. Ellen Dissanayake in *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes and Why* (1995) believes an impulse to make something ‘special’ also denotes a positive factor of care and concern,<sup>304</sup> and I feel that my efforts to lighten and attend to the objects was a way of working with my concerns about them, while also responding to some intuitive mothering drive to explore them as potential subversive ludic symbols that were both special, and potentially representative of transformative experience. Creating meaningful ways of experiencing our own life stories is a messy business, and somehow the objects conveyed the paradoxical and ambiguous nature of this journey, becoming symbols for moments of chaos and change and its possible affective dimensions upon the entire family dynamic. These thoughts only arose as I began playing with the objects, casting, and wrapping them with care and attention as a way of dealing with the worry and my own feelings of inadequacy in being challenged by their

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<sup>301</sup> Nachmanovitch, *The Art of Is Improvising as a Way of Life*, p.64.

<sup>302</sup> Nachmanovitch, *The Art of Is Improvising as a Way of Life*, p.64.

<sup>303</sup> Nachmanovitch, *The Art of Is Improvising as a Way of Life*, p.35.

<sup>304</sup> Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why* (United States of America: University of Washington Press, 1995), p.53.

presence. A friend humorously suggested that it was like I was ‘mummifying’ them, lightening the burden of feeling towards the objects and mothering them through my actions of ritualistically and diligently tending to the transformation of each one as it presented itself, removing them from their functionality as a gesture of protection and care.



Figure 62: Process of Casting, Wrapping, and Transforming Homemade Bong (RED) 2020, image by Kerryn Sylvia

## Shadow objects

Making the objects felt like a way of shifting perceptions and coming to view them as forms of archetypal shadow activation symbols; objects of projection containing their own shadow energies of youthful curiosity and exploration. Jungian analyst Robert A. Johnson in his book *Owning Your Own Shadow Understanding the Dark Side of the Psyche* (1991) suggests that the shadow creates a need for new experiences of transformation through eruptions of energy,<sup>305</sup> and for embracing rather than obliterating its destructive and uncontrolled elements. He tells us that that within the shadow resides both dark and light aspects that operate outside

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<sup>305</sup> Robert A. Johnson, *Owning Your Own Shadow: Understanding the Dark Side of the Psyche* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), p.116.

of mundane norms and characteristics of personality and that require we own, value, and give “honourable expression,”<sup>306</sup> to them, just as we do with more positive perceptions of elements that constitute the psyche. Johnson maintains both these shadow aspects must be lived, the lighter side being a noble or golden aspect that is also resisted and “relegated to the shadow because it can find no place in that great levelling process that is culture.”<sup>307</sup> Both shadow aspects are at play in the work *Illuminating Shadow Objects* (2022) and in tending to and transforming the objects from their intended functionality there was a sense of working with this paradoxical ambivalence of their existence while also bestowing on them an attentiveness of mothering care through actions of making and ritualised repetitiveness. Johnson explains that “While most rituals centre on the dark side of the personality, it is important to remember that golden opportunities also come from the same source”<sup>308</sup> and in pondering the qualities of illumination the forms adopt through my treatment of them they also offer insights into this other equally suppressed side of the shadow work. While the norms of familial and societal acceptability relegate the homemade bongs to objects belonging to the dark side of shadow work, my treatment of them as objects of art also connects them to the illuminating but also equally suppressed side of the shadow work.

In the exhibition *Liminal 2022* held at Mildura Arts Centre, the final installation of sculptural works for *Illuminating Shadow Objects* (2022) finds its form as primary-coloured and pellucid silhouettes acting as metaphoric symbols for the quality and nature of fundamental experiences. Stacked in totemic formation, they are suspended in a liminal in-between space like ghosts of their former selves, gently moving to the atmospheric conditions of the room and the bodily interactions of viewers. Subtle variations in colour that disrupt the patina of translucence in each stack can be read as a kind of membrane or connective tissue between perceptions of inner and outer psychological worlds and the strangely permeable moods of intoxication with their shared sense of vulnerabilities and shifts in temporality. Author Tom Yardley in *Why We Take Drugs Seeking Excess and Communion in the Modern World* (2012) argues for intoxication, along with other distinct temporalities like music and dance, as outlets for free expression of emotion, physical spontaneity, and a shared mutuality, the rhythms of which hold within them possibilities to “reconnect with this ancient desire for renewal and release by deliberately stepping outside the boundaries set by our mundane activities and

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<sup>306</sup> Johnson, *Owning Your Own Shadow: Understanding the Dark Side of the Psyche*, p.31.

<sup>307</sup> Johnson, *Owning Your Own Shadow: Understanding the Dark Side of the Psyche*, p.7.

<sup>308</sup> Johnson, *Owning Your Own Shadow: Understanding the Dark Side of the Psyche*, p.55.

transgress the imperatives for competence and control that are so pervasive in everyday life in contemporary society. In doing so, we open ourselves again to the possibility of experiencing the world and being with each other in ways that transcend the arbitrary divisions of society”<sup>309</sup>

Yardley believes surrendering to a shared compulsion for letting go momentarily resists a trajectory of future driven and fragmented social existence, acting as a panacea to endless cycles of consumption and production. While his views might be considered contentious, his book explores “the intoxicated body’s role in the creation of liminal spaces”<sup>310</sup> where experiences of drug use might play a more positive role in disrupting a highly structured and atomised world. He proposes the radical idea that functioning within the ephemeral reality of ad hoc ritualised performances “the kind of contact intoxication permits...may be one of the last bastions of authentic human interaction,”<sup>311</sup> and in constructing meaning and opening possibilities towards accessing the sacred, these encounters might be considered just as significant as any others. Relational to adolescence, drugs are normalised as a taboo topic in current Western societal structures, despite evidence that strongly suggests that risk-taking tendencies within this period of human development make us more predisposed to altering our realities and affecting changes that are both outwardly and inwardly explorative.

### **Mandorla, middle, third**

Now between elements of intoxication and shadows lies a balancing act with notions of light and dark as a paradox of tensions and possibilities rather than opposites, and Johnson (1991) visualises this as a middle place, a concept from Medieval theology as the mandorla. As a middle intersection of overlapping energies and eruptions, Johnson explains that this place “where light and dark begin to touch is where miracles arise,”<sup>312</sup> and is a signifying symbol (like a Venn diagram) for the tensions and contradictions of life. Living in a place of such tensions of opposites is a difficult and even painful experience but Johnson also attests to a poetic, imaginative quality at play within the crossovers of the mandorla. He remains optimistic about owning and touching these tensions and elements in the middle place that hold a potential to become unifying and restorative, like a healing gift of synthesis in a

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<sup>309</sup> Tom Yardley, *Why we take drugs seeking excess and communion in the modern world* (Hoboken: Routledge, 2012), p.4.

<sup>310</sup> Yardley, *Why we take drugs seeking excess and communion in the modern world*, p.116.

<sup>311</sup> Yardley, *Why we take drugs seeking excess and communion in the modern world*, p.112.

<sup>312</sup> Johnson, *Owning Your Own Shadow: Understanding the Dark Side of the Psyche*, p.111.

fractured world that “has the ability to surprise and shock - to remind us that there are links between the things we have always thought of as opposites,”<sup>313</sup> and that we receive hints of through our own unique stories of living.

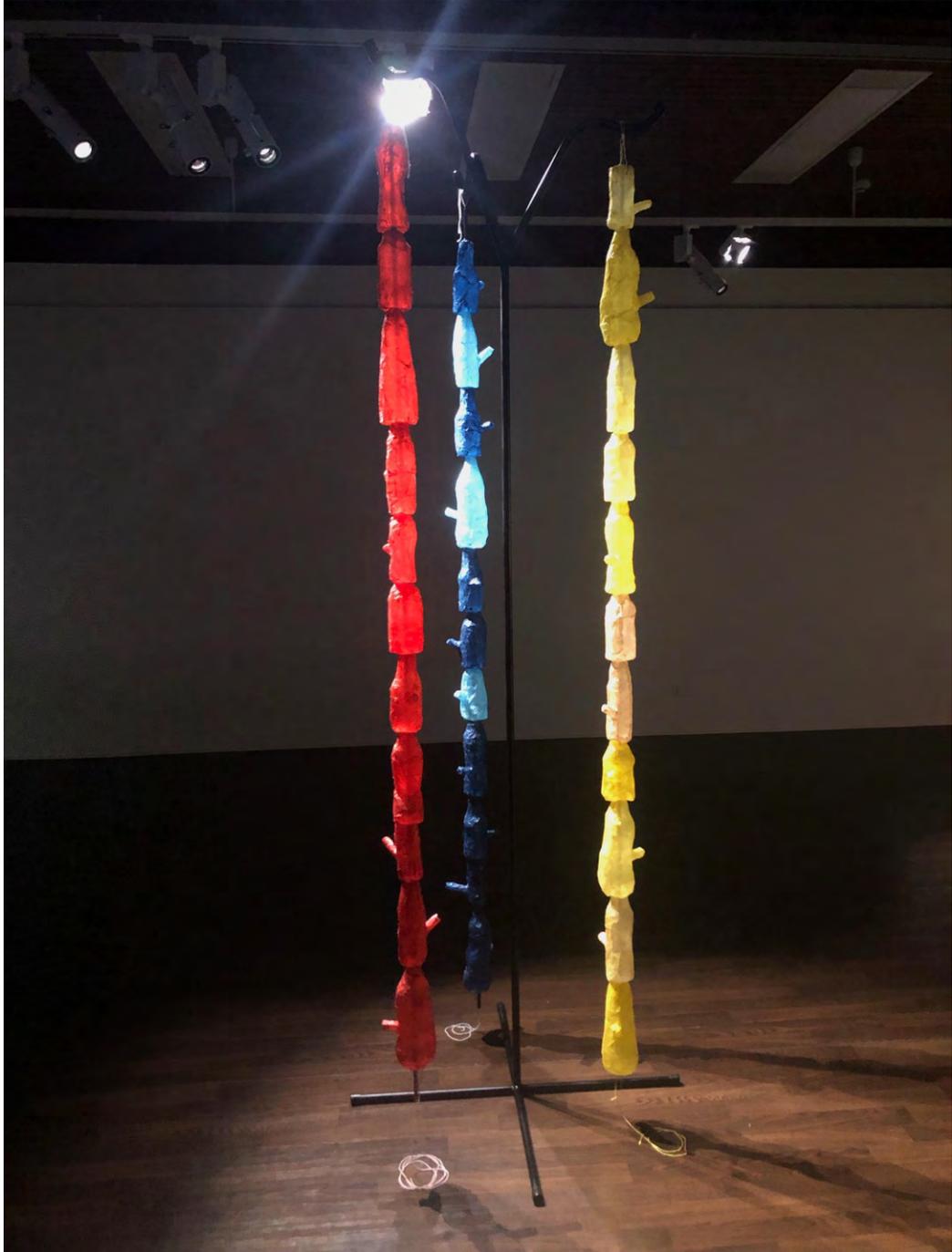


Figure 63: Kerry Sylvania, *Illuminating Shadow Objects* 2022, tape, tissue, string, wood, metal stand, Dimensions approx. 2.7 H, from Liminal 2022 exhibition, Mildura Arts Centre

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<sup>313</sup> Johnson, *Owning Your Own Shadow: Understanding the Dark Side of the Psyche*, pp.102-03.

My own research is framed around a similar notion of the hint or glimpse, and perceptions of these momentary views of things are derived through memory and the experiences of the other. This middle space of partial glimpses has been a challenge to theorise as it feels more like something perceived through other modes of knowing, something embodied, sensed or felt, that challenges the constraints of written or verbal language and requires Johnson's formulation of a poetic imagination that overlaps opposition dualities, giving instead form to things yet unknown and as yet still unscientifically quantifiable.<sup>314</sup> The mandorla shares with liminality a conception of the middle as something uncertain and poetic, but also as a necessity for healing, binding, and unifying. In bridging some gap between worlds, it becomes a space for exploring the geographies of these middle territories of discovery on both personal and social levels. Licata also theorises the middle territory as an emergent third position, revealing of a lived experience of opposing energies and multiple perspectives "that transcends previous ways of thinking, perceiving, and being,"<sup>315</sup> There are no privileged positions of knowing or power in the calling of these alternative explorations and imaginative faculties of the psyche, and it seems a natural predilection of adolescent passage that moves them towards this emergent middle or third zone of liminal anti-structure.

## **Mothering ambivalence**

Bourgeois was a poet of transitions. **David Salle**<sup>316</sup>

In a group exhibition *Rites of Passage: Art for the End of the Century* (1995) held at London's Tate Gallery, it was proposed that we live in a period of transition that will require many complex rituals and a revision of what might constitute a rite of passage. Some twenty-five years on, living with the impacts of global environmental, economic, and technological uncertainties, and amid the threat of viruses like the recent COVID-19 pandemic, this sentiment seems more relevant than ever. Curator Stuart Morgan in his introduction essay to the *Rites of Passage: Art for the End of the Century* (1995) exhibition catalogue claims that in

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<sup>314</sup> Johnson, *Owning Your Own Shadow: Understanding the Dark Side of the Psyche*, p.102.

<sup>315</sup> Licata, *A Healing Space: Befriending Ourselves in Difficult Times*, p.130.

<sup>316</sup> David Salle, "Outing the Inside," *The New York Review of Books*, December 7th, 2017, [http://www.davidsallestudio.net/%2717%20The%20New%20York%20Review%20of%20Books\\_bourgeois\\_de c.pdf](http://www.davidsallestudio.net/%2717%20The%20New%20York%20Review%20of%20Books_bourgeois_de c.pdf).

relation to rites of passage “Western societies may have abandoned many of the practices accompanying such changes in life”<sup>317</sup> but that it is still possible to apply Arnold van Gennep’s (1909) descriptions to our own culture to which many of the artists’ work included attests. In drawing on their own experiences of the liminal and its connection to artistic processes, Morgan suggests the artists’ work represented in the exhibition shares in an aesthetic instability existing as “always on the verge, in a state of becoming,”<sup>318</sup> and is reflective of a human tendency towards building myths and images of ourselves that do not correspond with facts but are not lies either, “they are simply stories we tell.”<sup>319</sup>

In the catalogue essay ‘Louise Bourgeois’ (1995) Morgan describes the artist’s work as being “neither life nor a surrogate for life but some third thing,”<sup>320</sup> connecting it with the mysteries and energies of other emergent conceptions and tensions of third or middle spatialising. Jung (2009) offers another conception of this third element existing as resolution of something ancient, “born from precisely this tension, and it almost always appears where one did not expect it...for when something long since passed away comes back again in a changed world, it is new.”<sup>321</sup> Jung maintains this kind of tension forces its way into the future through the cracks, much like Turner’s formulation of liminality and anti-structure does and in this way, it can be thought of as a new third or some mysteriously affecting third thing. It is fashioned out of passages of openness, when we are untethered, without direction and pursuing the light and the dark of it so that through these processes of revitalisation and rebirth we can bring what we discover back into the structural strength of the collective. This emergent new third, arising out of periods of discomfort, struggle, and disorientation, encapsulates the ambivalent mood at the heart of Bourgeois artwork.

Morgan also refers to her processes of making as a kind of mending and communication through a multifarious use of media and her relations with others.<sup>322</sup> He connects Bourgeois’ work with physiological acts of automatism and “radical repetition...an almost mediative practice: a way of locating a theme or simply allowing it to emerge...the treatment involves a

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<sup>317</sup> Stuart Morgan, "Introduction," in *Rites of passage: Art for the End of the Century*, ed. Stuart Morgan and Frances Morris (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1995), p.12.

<sup>318</sup> Morgan, "Introduction," p.19.

<sup>319</sup> Morgan, "Introduction," p.13.

<sup>320</sup> Stuart Morgan, "Louise Bourgeois," in *In Rites of Passage: Art for the End of the Century*, ed. Stuart Morgan and Frances Morris (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1995), p.55.

<sup>321</sup> Jung, *The Red Book Liber Novus*, p.311.

<sup>322</sup> Morgan, "Louise Bourgeois," pp.54-55.

kind of passive decision-making, a subtle sense of variation.”<sup>323</sup> This repetitive passivity in the making of artworks is something I share with Morgan’s description of her process and encounter within my own processes of working in the studio. Staying open to the forces and peculiarities of materials and memory means, as Morgan puts it, giving “permission for unconscious imagery to rise unbidden,”<sup>324</sup> while mediating with an intersubjective space of shared experiences. While it is Bourgeois’ small cell installations that are featured in *The Rites of Passage* (1995) exhibition, (of which the confined space of the shipping container might be considered a contemporary do-it-yourself, ready-made derivative), it is her work that encompasses the ambivalence and undertakings of mothering that I most closely relate to in my research.

### **Symbolically sculptural**

Louise Bourgeois vast and comprehensive artistic investigation of mother and child relationships across a lifespan remain a rarity in the artworld and causes curator Marie-Laure Bernadac in her book *Louise Bourgeois* (1996) to declare her work as something connected to the depths of the collective unconscious and primeval imagery, emotionally and psychologically charged, “tapped into the great primordial myths, thereby endowing her personal history with universal scope.”<sup>325</sup> Bourgeois’ exploration of the emotional content of materials, representations of experience, the psychological, and questions of the relational seem to be unapologetically thrust into the world, elements of which are evidenced even in very early sculptures such as her conjured, and stacked collectives of *Personages* (1945-1955) derived from connections to family, friends, and foes. In the book *Intimate Geometries: The Life and Work of Louise Bourgeois*, (2016) critic and curator Robert Storr provides insights into ways of thinking in symbolically invested sculptural terms about the *Personages* (1945-1955) as early arrangements of installation, praising these gatherings of totemic forms as being “charged with a ritualistic atmosphere,” and also marking a dramatic shift in the dynamics of sculptural space as new kind of experiential poetic spatial whole, now a familiarity in our contemporary exhibition landscape.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> Morgan, "Louise Bourgeois," p.55.

<sup>324</sup> Morgan, "Louise Bourgeois," p.56.

<sup>325</sup> Marie-Laure Bernadac, *Louise Bourgeois* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1996), p.9.

<sup>326</sup> Robert Storr, *Intimate Geometries: The Life and Work of Louise Bourgeois* (United States Monacelli Press 2016), p.148.

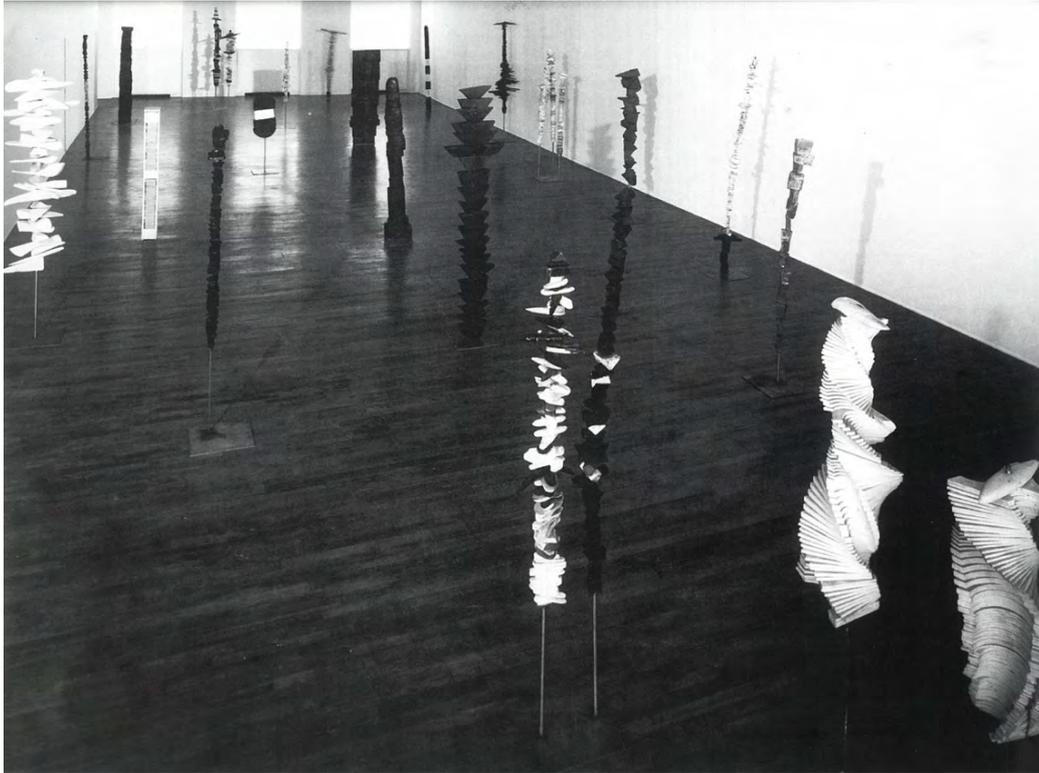


Figure 64: Louise Bourgeois, *Works from the Fifties* 1989, installation view Spoons-Westwater Gallery, New York, Robert Miller Gallery New York, in Marie-Laure Bernadac, *Louise Bourgeois*, London: Serpentine Gallery, 1996, p.48

Art historicist Mignon Nixon in *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and the Story of Modern Art* (2005) explains that for Bourgeois these early totemlike sculptures, numbering eighty or more, “coincided with raising a family of her own in New York. The work of mourning and the work of mothering, that is, converged in the work of sculpture (having “nothing to do with sculpture”).”<sup>327</sup> She proposes these works acted as surrogates for lost presences and relationships, and were conceived by Bourgeois “to express contradictory emotions, and to invite projection.”<sup>328</sup> It is Nixon’s view that some of Bourgeois *Personages* (1945-1955) are symbolic of the almost culturally taboo subject of female and maternal aggression, and she assesses the revealing fulcrum of her art through “the maternal subject’s heightened capacity for ambivalence – her ability not only to tolerate but to nurture this condition.”<sup>329</sup> Still today this maternal dynamic is subjected to cultural prohibition by patriarchal systems and cultural mores that wish to remain oblivious to its presence and even on a personal level between

<sup>327</sup> Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and the Story of Modern Art* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005 or 2008), (Chapter four, *Personages: The Work of Mourning*) pp.150-51.

<sup>328</sup> Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and the Story of Modern Art*, p.124.

<sup>329</sup> Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and the Story of Modern Art*, p.273.

parents and caregivers, its existence is largely resisted or remains hidden within the scope of discussions around child rearing and experiences of care.

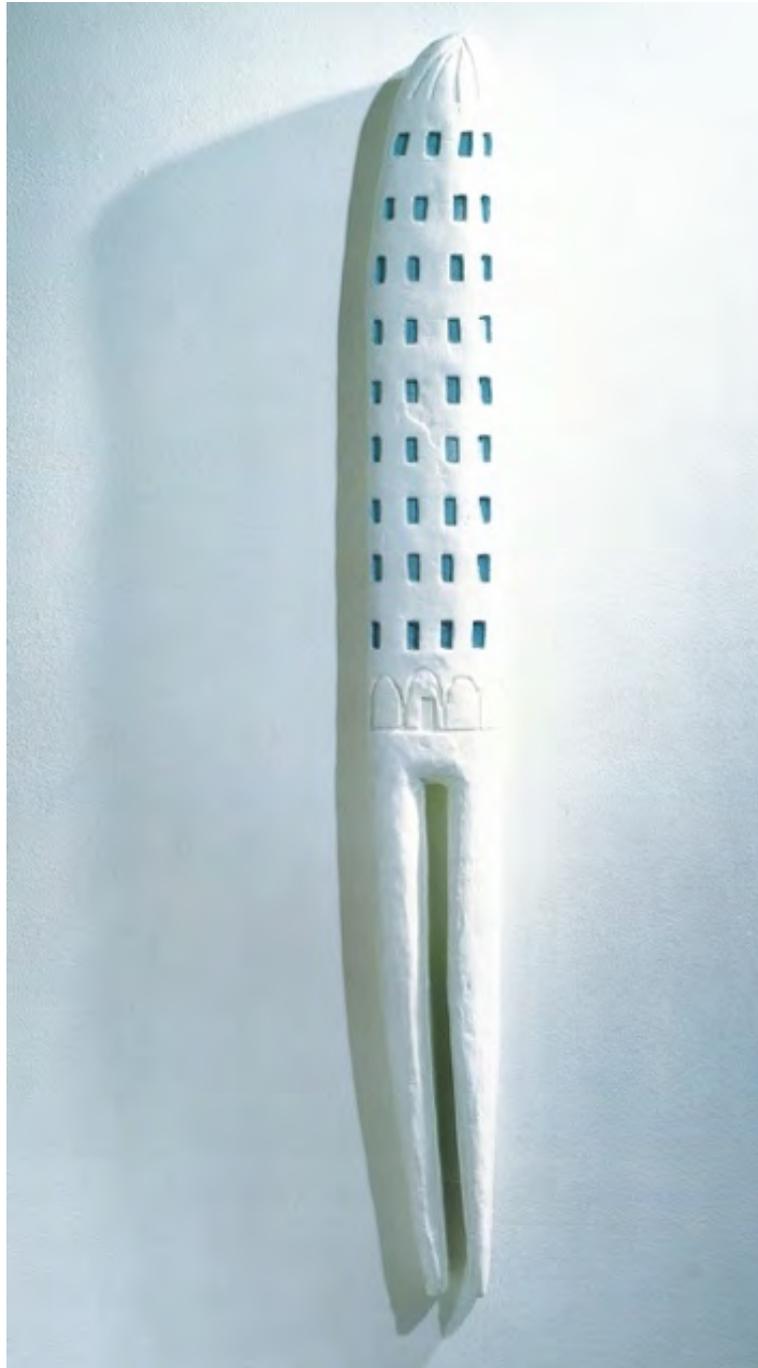


Figure 65: Louise Bourgeois, *Portrait of Jean-Louis* 1947-49, bronze, painted white and blue, 89 x 12.5 x 10cm, in Storr, Robert. Herkenhoff, Paulo. Schwartzman, Allan., *Louise Bourgeois*, London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2003, p.53

Nixon tells us that Bourgeois has explained her sculptural wall piece *Portrait of Jean-Louis*, (1947-49) as a work made in anger, an emotional reaction to her son's misbehaviour. She notes that "the mother's provocation by her child is an unexpected stimulus for a work,"<sup>330</sup> and in my experience, this is a sentiment just as relevant to the cultural and social expectations and roles of mothering today, despite greater transparency in supporting such emotions and feelings. Perhaps Morgan's assertion that the "first glimpse of something taboo teaches us more about ourselves than about what exactly is being looked at,"<sup>331</sup> aids in discovering and confronting the realities and emotional intensities of such experiences and encounters. Artworks like those of Bourgeois are affecting as they create possibilities "to span contradictions: disgust and the sacred, trauma and rapture,"<sup>332</sup> acting as openings towards stretching the boundaries of acceptability, and like utterances of the unspeakable for such truths.

Small in stature, Nixon refers to *Portrait of Jean-Louis*, (1947-49) as "top-heavy, armless, unsteadily balanced on spindly legs,"<sup>333</sup> but I find it could just as easily be suggestive of other bodily resonances, such as a phallus or the elongated form of a pulled tooth. Conceived as her child's portrait, the carved form invokes psychological conditions connected to both physical and symbolic content that is both abstracted and ambiguous. There is an obvious correlation to a building, or perhaps the sculpture relates more to a state of something metaphorically building, with the many little alchemical blue windows holding the possibility to bridge some gap between inner and outer realms of developmental awareness and experiences.

While Bourgeois' sculptures seem to structurally escape the stability and circadian rhythms of daily life, it must also be argued that they also develop out of her own mediations and connections with the materials, memories, and relationships of their very domesticity. Bernadac describes instances of Bourgeois exploration into sculptural forms from the 1940's as a "transition followed by a revelation arising from everyday life"<sup>334</sup> and suggests the artists use of humble materials such as folded and painted milk cartons became a way of warding off the sense of total chaos and solitude, she experienced each day after her family had left the New York apartment. As Bernadac tells us they allowed her to project her feelings of angst

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<sup>330</sup> Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and the Story of Modern Art*, p.152.

<sup>331</sup> Morgan, "Introduction," p.16.

<sup>332</sup> Morgan, "Introduction," p.16.

<sup>333</sup> Storr, *Intimate Geometries: The Life and Work of Louise Bourgeois*, p.152.

<sup>334</sup> Bernadac, *Louise Bourgeois*, p.50.

and distress on to a constructed material object as a way of “sculpting her emotions” and creating geometric and symbolic forms “against the order and uncertainty of human feelings.”<sup>335</sup> Nixon also explains Bourgeois early sculptural constructions as having an essence of the homemade or homeliness. In employing “salvaged materials and simple construction methods...values of sorting and saving, mending and reclamation” she worked with a kind of tension in forces between actions of destruction and reparation with her processes of making engaged in accessing the hidden or hinted at in things that was an essential element in her work.<sup>336</sup>

I speculate that Bourgeois shared with me in a notion of daily home life as something more undomesticated and untamed, with its own ambiguously floating and embodied forms of memory and knowledge. I take this idea even further in thinking of it as a possible space of liminal antistructure, whose walls offer some reprieve from the imposition of regulatory structures and the identities we cultivate for the sake of our larger external structural conditions, systems, and relations. Rich with its own intimacies and dramas, I often hear it said that we can never really know what goes on inside the four walls of a home and there is a kind of sanctity attached to this knowledge that moments enacted and played out within, might also serve a dynamic function potentially representative of Turner’s formulations of liminality and its “subjunctive mood, where suppositions, desires, hypotheses, possibilities, and so forth, all become legitimate.”<sup>337</sup> Though we are less likely to deny our own impulses inside the perceived confines of home, our relationships still change with it as we journey through the different phases of our lives and during periods such as adolescence the home can sometimes begin to feel less like a nurturing and safe womb and more like a tomb that you no longer wish to inhabit.

If read from the perspective of a youth, I find such ideas at play in pillar like structures such as Bourgeois’ *The Tomb of a Young Person*, (1947–49), but Nixon offers another view in referring to it in terms of Bourgeois and her mothering role. She identifies something more melancholically related to “the protectiveness and burden of care that mark the Kleinian ego”<sup>338</sup> at play in the work, framing such ideas within Klein’s feminist psychoanalytic

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<sup>335</sup> Bernadac, *Louise Bourgeois*, p.50.

<sup>336</sup> Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and the Story of Modern Art*, pp.150-51.

<sup>337</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, p.vii.

<sup>338</sup> Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and the Story of Modern Art*, p.152.

tradition. Nixon claims that dialogue between Klein’s psychoanalysis and Bourgeois’ art has radically altered the context of the maternal and continues to impact on notions of mothering agency and ambivalence to this day.<sup>339</sup> Even in the title of the work there is a sense of the depressive, a psychic negativity to the pillar as a tomb that Nixon tells us has a “restraining effect...intensified by the shadow of a warning.”<sup>340</sup>

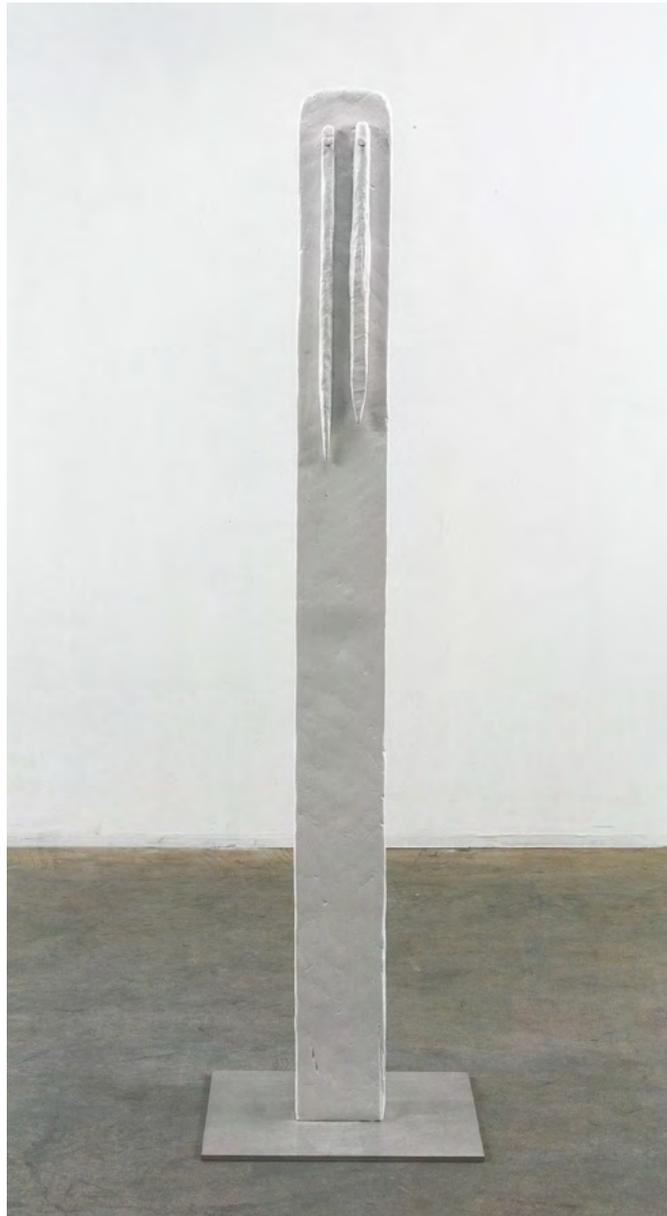


Figure 66: Louise Bourgeois, *The Tomb of a Young Person* 1947 – 49 bronze painted white and stainless steel, (116.8 x 30.5 x 30.5 cm). The Easton Foundation, in Robert Storr, *Intimate Geometries: The Life and Work of Louise Bourgeois*, United States: Monacelli Press, 2016, p.206

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<sup>339</sup> Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and the Story of Modern Art*, p.12.

<sup>340</sup> Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and the Story of Modern Art*, p.152.

Anterior to its stark rigidness are a pair of ghost-like legs symbolically suspended and nailed up high in the air, dangling awkwardly as if they are struggling to find a way down or escape from the tomb. These forms punctuate the surface as if revealed from within, pushing through the surface of the monolith structure as if they wish to walk away, escape elsewhere, to be freed from the tomb and perhaps reborn into newness. In both *Portrait of Jean-Louis* (1947-49) and *Tomb of a Young Person* (1947) Nixon suggests “maternal ambivalence arises as a psychological position (in Klein’s sense of the term) in its own right,”<sup>341</sup> and that her processes of making reads like a violence of actions or movements as a way of protecting against such ambivalence and aggression without denying its existence.

## Unstable constructions

The resolution of a problem...Or by transforming chaos into order. Find sense out of nonsense. Order out of disorder. **Louise Bourgeois**<sup>342</sup>

Later iterations of Bourgeois’s *Personages* (1945-1955) made mostly after her father died, become more fragmented, uncontrolled, spiralling, and there is a sense of freedom and sensitivity to movement in these works. Consisting of more irregular stacked and assembled organic shapes, they are suggestive of dense growth and spontaneity. While Nixon refers to them as a “stacked figure”<sup>343</sup> Storr views such works as *Untitled* (1954) having more visceral physical attributes that “resemble exposed vertebrae – as if Bourgeois, having pulled away the muscle of her lean anthropomorphic figures, were revealing of the awful difficulty they have of staying erect.”<sup>344</sup> He draws on the moveable fragments and friction of “centripetal and centrifugal forces”<sup>345</sup> to explain a sense of psychological instability, uncertainty, and chaos belonging to the artists sphere and experiences of family and social relations.

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<sup>341</sup> Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and the Story of Modern Art*, p.273.

<sup>342</sup> Germano Celant, *Louise Bourgeois The Fabric Works* (New York: Skira, 2011), p.90.

<sup>343</sup> Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and the Story of Modern Art*, p.151.

<sup>344</sup> Storr, *Intimate Geometries: The Life and Work of Louise Bourgeois*, p.298.

<sup>345</sup> Storr, *Intimate Geometries: The Life and Work of Louise Bourgeois*, p.298.



Figure 67: Louise Bourgeois *Untitled* 1954, painted plaster and stainless steel, (165.1 x 30.5 x 30.5 cm), Foundation Beyeler, in Robert Storr, *Intimate Geometries: The Life and Work of Louise Bourgeois*, United States: Monacelli Press, 2016, p.240

Storr suggests that for Bourgeois the closeness of family life that she longed to hold onto was embodied through the “essence inhered in the relation of each of its distinct and disparate members to the others,” and rather than any one symbol or person and through multifarious sculptural processes she explored “a constellation of partially revealed presences.”<sup>346</sup> In many of the irregular stacked assemblages of these presences such as *Untitled* (1954) there is an inherent sense of structural uncertainty that is relatable to Turner’s concept of “anti-structural liminality...areas of time and space...open to the play of thought, feeling, and will,”<sup>347</sup> when the initiate of a rite of passage is also thought to be psychologically unrecognisable, even to themselves. The subjunctive mood of the imagined, or possible is expressed through these abstract dimensions of such emotional states which for Turner, do not emerge out of careful planning, rational realities or imposed rules of orderly conduct and behaviour, but come instead from more generative, new, and fantastic ritualistic and aesthetic forms, capturing something of the juncture and tensions between the static and variable.<sup>348</sup> This fragmented, irregular, and roughly assembled aesthetic of stacked and knotted forms, suggestive of psychological passages of growth and uncertainty are explored in more depth through the necklace pieces in Chapter One and in the ritualistically installed muddy totemic stacks in Chapter Four. The next section also focuses on a series of later works installed in the *Liminal* (2022) exhibition, also connected to the precarity and instability of visceral attributes and elements expressed through Bourgeois assemblages.

### **Tenuously holding, hanging, halos**

The unstable nature of Bourgeois sculptures identified by Storr as a matter of indisputable fact<sup>349</sup> are a quality at play in a series of works for the exhibition *Liminal* (2022) where materials coalesce, tenuously holding on to each other, precariously anchored and hanging or suspended from the wall. Here there is a similar sense of instability that derives from the fragility and desperation of the materials involved to hang on to each other. It is a precariously fragile relationship, sometimes literally just hanging onto each other by what seems to be a precarious thread transferred from fabric to plastic to wooden knot, mutuality implicated in a balancing act of weighted and complimentary forces.

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<sup>346</sup> Storr, *Intimate Geometries: The Life and Work of Louise Bourgeois*, p.151.

<sup>347</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, p.vii.

<sup>348</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, p.vii.

<sup>349</sup> Storr, *Intimate Geometries: The Life and Work of Louise Bourgeois*, p.151.



Figure 68: Kerry Sylvania, *Liminal* 2022, film still from exhibition tour, Mildura Arts Centre, image courtesy of Robert Klarich, <https://www.milduraartscentre.com.au/WhatsOnPages/Digital/Liminal-Exhibition-Tour.aspx>

These works with their fragile entanglements of transformed materials, knots, and natural wooden elements, hang like objects of ritualistic fervour, as if they could be taken down from the wall and activated as wearable objects of ceremony or celebration. These sculptural works seem to escape what Turner refers to as “the classificatory nets of their quotidian, routinized spheres of action,”<sup>350</sup> acting instead as players in a drama and reminders that some level of chaos, subversion and instability is necessary to allow for new discoveries. The sculptures hover somewhere in-between ancient and modern paradigms, bringing together a tension of natural and manmade materials and there is a gift in honouring the tensions of these coalescing forces. While they are revealing of something within the abstract dimensions of the psychological, there is also a remnant of the religious in the structures with halo like circles a repetitive element across the series of works that is common to depictions of aureole above the heads of a saint or holy person.

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<sup>350</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, p.vii.



Figure 69: Kerry Sylvia, *The Gentle Balance Between Here and There* 2022, latex, clay, wood, string, anti-fabric



Figure 70: Kerry Sylvia, *The Play of Letting Go* 2021, anti-fabric, wood, tree knots



Figure 71: Kerry Sylvia, *A Mothering Song* 2021, anti-fabric, wood, tree knots

Like many of Bourgeois artworks, each is titled to evoke moods, situations, and experiences on a poetic and psychological register rather than trying to make recognisable depictions of individuals. While some of them are suspended in a metaphorical liminal zone between floor and ceiling, others make some contact with the floor, or other elements on the floor, that attempt to keep them tenuously and symbolically connected and in a state of not quite readiness to completely let go to past inversions of the self.

### **Knots of liminality and repetition**

Storr explains Bourgeois' familial relationships as evidence of "the extreme entanglement of the emotional knots involved."<sup>351</sup> In my work such familial emotional knots of complicity abound. Knots are everywhere engaged in the space, a dominant motif evident both as methods for tenuously holding things together and as symbols and nodes in the networks of identity formation and experiences. Such a proliferation of knots refers to our knotted and intertwined personal histories that explore a shared experience of transformational potentials and the knotty emotional charges of energy within adolescent fluctuations and disorientations. They are knots that hold something of the liminal struggles and possibilities of events occurring

<sup>351</sup> Storr, *Intimate Geometries: The Life and Work of Louise Bourgeois*, p.410.

within them, and I refer to them as knots of liminality, knots of a subjunctive mood of mothering.



Figure 72: Kerry Sylvania, *Holding the In-between* (detail) 2021, heat-treated anti-fabric, wood, knots, metal, fabric, latex

The knots are tied fabric lengths melted into fragile lines, fabric knots dipped in latex and paint, knots in string, casts of natural knots in plaster and natural dyes, and those magical little tree knots themselves, collected as symbolic gifts absorbed from the natural landscape scattered throughout work. These gesturally anthropomorphic tree-knot forms are like threshold objects that nature provides to connect us to an understanding of ourselves as agents of becoming in a perpetually unstable and fragile world. In assigning the knots personal symbolic value they are made special and as I work with them through repetitive actions and

processes of transforming and making, they also become a nurturing mechanism for emotional projections and release, providing glimpses into understandings that come through more embodied ways of knowing and doing in mutuality with the experiences of others. At times the repetition felt like a chore, like the monotony of housework, then I would float back into the ritual of it, the comfort of watching the objects multiply and replicate on the way to becoming something like a collective of inchoate units, without the pressure of any premediated idea of what they had to be.

Bourgeois writes of the role repetition plays for the artist in making work in the essay 'Freud's Toys' (1990) suggesting the action derives from the suffering of an artist which is tantamount to the value and language of the artwork created. She explains the repetition evident in an artist's work exists "because they have no access to a cure"<sup>352</sup> from their own relentless guilt and torment. In discussing Freud's compulsion to collect small objects of cultural antiquity and symbolism, despite his disbelief in the power and potency of such objects, Bourgeois recounts her own father's humble collection of pebbles as personal symbols that he associated with "collecting beautiful moments"<sup>353</sup> where each one became an object that expressed gratitude and compensated for life's hardships. In discussing this collection of symbolic tree knots with others, I have discovered a shared compulsion to collect these objects and keep them as precious objects, suggesting that they are also social symbols that hold meaning and drive a collective habit of fascination with their existence. They hold a positive energy that draws people to them as objects of meaning, wonder, enchantment, and beauty.

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<sup>352</sup> Louise Bourgeois, "Freud's Toys," *Art Forum* 28, no. 5 (1990): p.113.

<sup>353</sup> Bourgeois, "Freud's Toys," p.113.



Figure 73: Kerry Sylvia, *Foresting the Uncertain Middle* (installation view) 2022, from *Liminal* exhibition, Mildura Arts Centre

While Storr attributes many of the motivating sculptural energies invested in artworks generated by Bourgeois to the extremities of uncontrollable, depressive emotions, he also explains them in terms of their dynamism and tensions. Storr suggests that “the manner in which they have been harnessed are as much the true subject of Bourgeois’ work as the emotional antithesis whose friction generates them.”<sup>354</sup> While I acknowledge that harnessing my own emotional tensions has something to do with a kind of mutually intersubjective suffering which perhaps, I share with many women and caregivers, it does not come from a place of deeply depressive emotional turmoil like that attached to the personal life experiences of Bourgeois. Instead, my harnessing processes for this kind of generative point of friction is both an emotional release for perceived inadequacies from mothering guilt and lack of confidence in adequately mentoring my children through their adolescent passages, but also comes from a positive place through memories of my own adolescent rite of passage story. I feel the transformational sense of renewal and benefit derived from this personal experience,

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<sup>354</sup> Storr, *Intimate Geometries: The Life and Work of Louise Bourgeois*, p.412.

allows for a more contemplative mediation on these tensions with the experiences of others. Improvising with these entanglements of memory and current life events of adolescence through a daily repetition and ritualised routine of making processes is an outlet for emotions but also a way of staying attentive to the difficult passages of inner struggle in others.

## Knots like hearts



Figure 74: Experimentation with cast knots for installation layouts, circular formats, and clusters, images by Kerryn Sylvia 2019-2021

Connected with the structural peculiarities of Bourgeois' forms of emergent and radical repetition are the embryonic and irregular forms of the scattered floor installation *Knots as Cosmos of Little Beating Hearts* (2022). Earlier iterations of the knots were explored as mandalas or single spiral installations. They were haphazardly piled in one cluster or broken apart and left to coalesce into smaller communities of repetitive forms like small islands. These more fragmented formations allowed for consideration into the space between each of the clusters to take hold as fields from which sentient personal and poetic forms of knowledge emerge. Anthropologist Tim Ingold in *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (2013) suggests “swirls around and between the islands” are passages that allow more articulate reason-based forms of knowledge to join up and are not something submerged or buried deep in psyche but integral to “a level of knowing from the inside.”<sup>355</sup> Ingold maintains that this personal knowledge is concerned with reawakening our senses, allowing “knowledge to grow from the inside of being in the unfolding of life,”<sup>356</sup> where paying attention is a process of actively following with an openness that allows you to relive its movements through gestures of doing and making.

<sup>355</sup> Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, p.111.

<sup>356</sup> Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, p.8.

Eventually finding form as emerging spiral shapes the installation of *Knots as Cosmos of Little Beating Hearts* (2022) recalls something embryonic with each gathering of objects appearing like new spinal growths or tails that might eventually become spines. They are unstable and spiralling, as if swirling around themselves and each other, revealing of the sacredness of the spiral in mysticism traditions and archetypal symbology. The objects are like small, staged gatherings responsive to a heartfelt sense of entangled knottiness emerging out of a social drama of emotions, uncertainties, and a myriad of affective intra-actions that retain what Ingold refers to as a “possibility of direct correspondence with the creative process that gives rise to them.”<sup>357</sup>

The repetitious assemblages of irregular organic shapes forms cluster together with no rod or pedestal necessary, grounded instead in the tacit semblance of the ordinary contexts out of which they grow. Their colours are also reminiscent of and situated in contexts of home, coloured using dye stuffs from around the house relating to the mundane and everyday like coffee, tea, beetroot juice, toilet blue, and things collected from the garden like walnut shells and yellow sour grass flowers. Scattered on the floor, this repetition of objects, gather into forms reminiscent of growth and struggling to find form, pattern, and shape, as if on their way to something else not yet known.

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<sup>357</sup> Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, p.7.

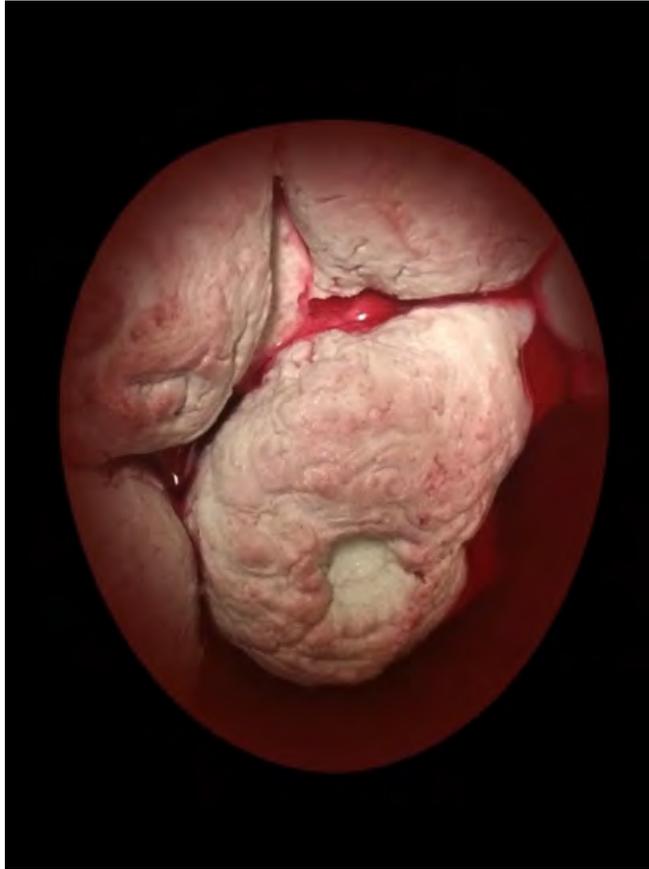


Figure 75: Plaster Knots Dyed in Beetroot Juice, image by Kerry Sylvia

There is an implied dynamic of movement to the forms, as if something is stirring and the piles of repetitive forms urge the work into an emergent frame of mind, their energies and forces belonging to a spiral dynamic of things brewing and revealed slowly over time. In the book *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science* (1995) metaphysician René Guénon explains the progress of the spiral as revealing of something more hidden and peripheral than central, and representative of “degrees of universal Existence...of an ascent through the hierarchy of the states of the being”<sup>358</sup> and the loose spiral formation in the floor installation of *Knots as Cosmos of Little Beating Hearts* (2022) are symbolically connected to such an essence of becoming states. It was also suggested that some of the knot forms resembled hearts and this metaphorical association for them grew as they did in numbers and found expression as spiralling emotional clusters with a sense of expansion and contraction connecting them to inner bodily movements of an actual beating heart.

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<sup>358</sup> Rene, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, p.231.

## Knots of liminality and repetition



Figure 76: Kerry Sylvia, *Knots as Cosmos of Little Beating Hearts* (installation view) 2022, plaster, natural dyes, from *Liminal*, 2022, Mildura Arts Centre

Storr suggests that Bourgeois defence of her use of reiteration in making artwork was not in finding fulfilment through their production, but to sublimate her own emotionally charged feelings of dissatisfaction, whereby she was “constantly returning to certain shapes, compositions, and formal operations,”<sup>359</sup> as a kind of practice that bordered on the therapeutic. Casting each of the individual knots in the installation was used in a similar way and became a ritualised form of calming myself through making and responding to events with hopeful, mindful, love and attentiveness rather than reacting negatively. My attendance to the making might even be viewed as a form of processual self-punishment, as compensatory actions for feelings of mothering inadequacy in the face of uncertainty. Storr also writes of Bourgeois possessing an internal method and attitude of working that was both intuitive and

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<sup>359</sup> Storr, *Intimate Geometries: The Life and Work of Louise Bourgeois*, p.412.

improvisational that she utilised in the “transformation of a sculptural negative into a positive.”<sup>360</sup> Playing with the objects gave me a sense of this negative, positive transference where the process becomes paramount to the sculptural integrity and embedded meaning of the work. Dimensions of the psychological inner landscape become mingled, and personal stories and experiences suspended within processes of such diligent and repetitively external forms of making.



Figure 77: Kerry Sylvia, *Knots as Cosmos of Little Beating Hearts* (close up-detail) 2022, plaster, natural dyes, dimensions approx. 50cm in diameter x 50 pieces-scattered floor work

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<sup>360</sup> Storr, *Intimate Geometries: The Life and Work of Louise Bourgeois*, p.314.

## Midlife mothering

I also place myself within the work in another symbolic way by developing a constraint in the numbers of ever-growing casts in *Knots as Cosmos of Little Beating Hearts* (2022) that corresponds to notions of midlife mothering, with my own rite revealing itself as a sort of becoming on the threshold of middle-age. With my midlife mothering body no longer a maternal body, identification with the role also shifts and there is a sense of loss not just for the children, but also for an identification with the self in that maternal role. Andrea Liss (2009) suggests that while artwork made by artist/mothers are labours of love, they also flow beyond passionate mother and child intersubjective couplings, leading into potentials for the flowering of mutual respect in giving “life to other forms of relationship”<sup>361</sup> and loving actions. Like Liss, I live in the luxury of a culture and generation that allows for consideration into “becoming a mother/caregiver”<sup>362</sup> as a choice and not an obligation. There have also been very few expectations placed on me in terms of career choice, and in choosing to be an artist, I have not felt the pressure within dichotomous renditions of good mother/bad artist, good artist/bad mother. I have found just simply believing in myself as an artist has been challenging enough without the addition of mothering added to such formulations of career and persona.

Embodied through the loving actions of making, my midlife mothering essence is symbolically engaged within the work *Knots as Cosmos of Little Beating Hearts* (2022) in that there are fifty plaster knots in each cluster on the floor corresponding to this Western cultural midlife milestone of aging. There is also an inherent self-imposed condition placed on the completion of the process in that it had to end before I turn fifty-one, adding to a sense of it as a ritualised process enacted over a fixed period. In awakening through the work to find myself concurrently also hovering on the edge of a state of liminality, author Elizabeth Gudrais in her article ‘The Brain at Midlife’ (2001) reports on findings by neuroscientist Francine Benes in identifying a blind spot in research documenting measurements of myelination in the brain taking place during both the teenage years and then again within the midlife brain. Gudrais explains that Bene’s research “shows that the human brain may continue to develop physically until approximately age 55”<sup>363</sup> with early childhood, adolescence and midlife all sharing in

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<sup>361</sup> Liss, *Feminist art and the maternal*, p.152.

<sup>362</sup> Liss, *Feminist art and the maternal*, p.146.

<sup>363</sup> Elizabeth Gudrais, "The Brain at Midlife," (Cambridge, Mass: Irina Kuksin, 2001).

<https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2001/05/the-brain-at-midlife-html>. See Francine Benes original research

this rise in myelination. This affects maturing patterns of behaviour and cognitive development in youth, and changes in emotional and memory patterning during midlife. Gudrais tells us that “although cognitive development is generally believed to end by age 16 or sooner, emotional development may be ongoing even into the sixth decade of life.”<sup>364</sup> This research struck a chord with me in thinking about entanglements between the mad joy of adolescence and the vitality of midlife mothering on a level of connective shared biology. Within potential periods of crisis and chaos it revealed a feeling of becoming on the threshold of experiencing a feminising sense of middle age and seemed to explain something of the desire to better understand and deal with such affecting emotional and cognitive changes within the emergence of disorientating passages of adolescence.

In the opening quote to this chapter, American poet Coleman Barks expresses a view of any space holding a potential to be endowed with a sense of the sacred, requiring only a subtle shift in perspective and a desire to access something within each of our unique stories of spiritual significance. His words are a reminder that opportunities to attune to notions of the mystical and symbolic lie everywhere and that carving out spaces where social roles and identities are given room to temporarily fall away can occur even within an ordinary suburban backyard shipping container. As a space for holding and containing ludic and unstructured adolescent forms of ritualised behaviours and actions, it was elevated in significance and called for responses that activated an artistic/mothering sensibility of actions and processes as a way of harnessing and working with such emerging heightened emotional resonances. Through my mothering lens of attentive acceptance, I come to a sense that perhaps we are missing something on a greater collective level of responsibility toward reimagining and renewing opportunities for rites and rituals to flourish, and that by choosing to ignore, sanction or dismiss their presence as possibilities for transformative experience, young people are finding it harder than ever to belong and find a vision for themselves within the complexities of our current societal structures. In lieu of this they improvise, innovate, and create for themselves and it is our gift to them to improvise along with them, honouring and staying with them in mindful attendance of the other.

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paper ‘Brain Development, VII: Human Growth Spans Decades’ (1998)

<https://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/doi/epdf/10.1176/ajp.155.11.1489>

<sup>364</sup> Gudrais, "The Brain at Midlife."

## Chapter 4: The Mud

Only with the inner eye of imagination can we see inner forms of Being and Becoming. **Mary Caroline Richards**<sup>365</sup>

This chapter extends down into the ground where the earth of place and contexts of dirt become symbolic for allegorical muddy states and conditions for shaping, moulding, and journeying within passages of adolescent identity formation. The construction of ritualised space through the installation *Teen Stacks: Structures beyond words* (2022), was exhibited as part of a group show held at Mildura Arts Centre, and in searching for expressions of the poetic event, the casting of ordinary household domestic objects with locally harvested Murray River mud grew into a collective of humble totemic stacks, making offerings towards and honouring adolescent passages of liminal uncertainty and transformational potential. Through a shared sense of tending and mutuality that they grow out of a myriad of relational forces, memories, resonances and events of liminal time and space, a grounding process for attuning to experiences with my teenage children. In the scope of this project, they act as a kind of sticky muddiness, a precarious togetherness of offerings, honouring and remaining attentive to the challenges and unpredictability's of palpable experiences within periods of adolescent liminal uncertainty.

Through an improvisational engagement with the mud from the river bank the dynamism of the substance, its powers and possibilities are explored and became metaphoric symbols for states of inarticulateness and disorder, which hold their own residual powers and potential to both pollute and incite change within more dominant Westernised social structures. Further imaginings of the muddy substance are found in the work *Journeying to the self of someplace else* (2022) which also reveal potentials towards journeying into and out of the estrangement and chaos of liminal conditions, seeking movement through a more hopeful and subjunctive mood of possibilities within currents of such instability. Turner in *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982) states that:

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<sup>365</sup> Richards, *The Crossing Point Selected Talks and Writings*, p.120.

“Subjunctivity is fittingly the mother of indicativity, since any actualization is only one among a myriad possibilities of being, some of which may be actualized in space-time somewhere or somewhen else. The ‘hard saying’ ‘except ye become as a little child’ assumes new meaning. Unless the fixing and ordering processes of the adult, sociostructural domain, are liminally abandoned and the initiand submits to being broken down to a generalized prima materia, a lump of human clay, he cannot be transformed, reshaped to encounter new experiences.<sup>366</sup>

This chapter considers the essential urgency implied by Turner’s comment and the potentialities generated by such states of disintegration and fragmentation that ordered social structures paradoxically both rally against, as something dangerous and contaminative, and need to stay in tension with to ensure the injection of movement and newness into societies lest they become too rigid and stayed. In reshaping the muddy material, it is as if the inside is turned outside, perhaps revealing of a more metaphorical, internal, and anti-establishment world view where despite reshaping, things remain somewhat unrefined and roughly hued, as if testing the boundaries and aesthetic tastes of culture and society, despite their newfound forms. Working with the muddy contexts of the material creates associations beyond rational consciousness where the substance is honoured for its own all-pervasive stickiness and inarticulate resistance to things, and where poet and potter Mary Caroline Richards in *The Crossing Point Selected Talks and Writings* (1973) explains feeling matter requires “the capacity of being open, a feminine receptivity of soul, into which new awareness may play.”<sup>367</sup>

Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña and her precarious objects or collections of *precarios* embrace a sense of structural vulnerability and the artist engages in attentive processes of making where her constructions become like offerings to the spiritual and sacred dimensions on the cultural interstices working with materials. Her work is considered for its qualities of instability and precariousness, embraced, and made as offerings towards honouring which the essence of the muddy stacks and forms of coalescing shapes also share in. Vicuña’s precarious objects also hold disorderly residual powers that work with the rubbish and disorder of social structure,

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<sup>366</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.84.

<sup>367</sup> Richards, *The Crossing Point Selected Talks and Writings*, p.56.

and I connect her work to the liminal phase of a rite of passage when one is thought to be in a state of precariously and ambiguously teetering between two worlds.

## **Tending to matter**

In the catalogue essay for the group exhibition *Southern Western* (2022) co-curators Jane Polkinghorne and Gareth Hart write that the work selected for inclusion in the exhibition “explores and connects with the particularity and peculiarity of this place at this time, Mildura, in the Victorian Mallee, close to where iconic rivers meet,”<sup>368</sup> and I experience the installation *Teen Stacks: Structures Beyond Words* (2022) as reflective of such particular/peculiar connections to place. The clay featured in the work is sourced from a small inlet creek within the Karadoc wetlands close to our family home in the suburb of Irymple, and over the years the place has often called me back to it inspiring and inviting responses and various art projects.

Tending to the mud became a way of responding to the drama of events arising within adolescent periods of crisis, when as anthropologist Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (2002) explains persons are “in a marginal state...somehow left out in the patterning of society.”<sup>369</sup> Adolescent connections to disorder, vulnerability, and creativity came from Douglas’s understandings of dirt as a polluting factor where what contaminates or muddies up predefined notions of structure and control becomes dangerous and something to be avoided, quashed or eradicated completely. In expressing her ideas of the ritual apparatus in both First Nations and contemporary religions, Douglas shares a concern for material benefits and moral conformity over philosophy which she believes runs the risk of creating nothing more than empty rituals.

While Douglas’s discussion attributes witches with powers that “symbolise their ambiguous, inarticulate status”<sup>370</sup> within social structures, I argue periods of adolescence can be perceived as a contemporary equivalent to such anti-social conceptions in terms of my own research where, as interstitial persons they are often relegated to areas of society considered in terms

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<sup>368</sup> Jane and Hart Polkinghorne, Gareth, "Southern Western: Art, place, colonialisation, adaptation," (Mildura Arts Centre, 2022), Exhibition Catalogue, p.4.

<sup>369</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, p.118.

<sup>370</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, p.127.

of the ambiguities and contradictions of inarticulateness. For Douglas, points in social structure of “inarticulate, unstructured areas emanate unconscious powers,”<sup>371</sup> have their own energies connected to more mystical powers which rational and protective structures discriminate against as regions of the uncontrollable and disordered.



Figure 78: Kerry Sylvia *Teen Stacks: Structures Beyond Words* (detail) 2022. Locally sourced bisque fired river clay, wooden stands, seats. Southern Western Group Exhibition Feb-May 2022, Mildura Arts Centre

## Mud mattering

Douglas after the work of theorist Anton Ehrenzweig suggests a certain rapture derived through works of art that “arises from the perceiving of inarticulate forms”<sup>372</sup> which the condition of the objects in *Teen Stacks: Structures Beyond Words* (2022) seems to exemplify in their structural simplicity and through their awkwardly precarious connections with each other. Here dirt, which in contemporary cultural terms Douglas describes as a tabooed substance which “is essentially disorder,”<sup>373</sup> thickens into the stickiness and viscosity of mud. Credited with founding a movement toward archetypal psychology American psychologist

<sup>371</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, p.127.

<sup>372</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, p.47.

<sup>373</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, p.2.

James Hillman, in the book *Alchemical Psychology: Uniform Edition of the Writings of James Hillman* (2010) discusses the work at play in crafting the animated world of the psyche and soul-making requiring a more materialised language of alchemy and dreams inclusive of, amongst other things, “heavy earths.”<sup>374</sup> In the introduction to Hillmans essay ‘The Salt of Soul, the Sulphur of Spirit’ by psychotherapist Thomas Moore (2010) such heavy earths become a grounding for what he refers to as Hillmans “muddy contexts of the soul,”<sup>375</sup> where a felt experience of spirit is enabled and encouraged to feed the imagination of our laws, rules, dogma, and structures, to stop them from becoming too fixed in notions of rationality or liberalism. Within these muddy contexts spirit and soul are not split off or transcendent of each other but instead become what the editor of the book Jungian analyst Robert Moore explains through Hillman’s work as “the spirited ways of everyday life that feed soul rather than starve it.”<sup>376</sup>

Casts of the sifted Murray River mud are sculpted from the interiors of domestic everyday containers and vessels, and they enter Hillmans languages and technologies of alchemy where, as he explains “the shapes of soul in which our personality is being worked-contrast with the concepts we use, concepts such as inner space or internal object, or fantasy, or patience, containment, suppression or relationship.”<sup>377</sup> Something of the ordinary daily rituals and experiences of shared contemporary familial life are caught within the sensate materiality of the matter, revealing of what I like to think of as stories from the inside that Hillman suggests aid us in grasping meaning and “movements of the soul.”<sup>378</sup>

In earlier experiments with the matter, moulding and casting, turning the insides outside and engaging atmospheric elements so they had time to cure and reveal the fragile forms within, I learnt to be attentive to and accepting of the substance’s behaviours with its unpredictable and unstable movements and tendency to crack in relation to the ever emerging, changing and ongoing forces in which they coalesced. The material also seemed, concurrently to reflect something of the actions and events experienced with my adolescent children and our familial

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<sup>374</sup> James Hillman, *Alchemical Psychology: Uniform Edition of the Writings of James Hillman*, vol. 5 (Putnam, Conn: Spring Publications, Inc., 2010), p.13.

<sup>375</sup> James Hillman, "The Salt of Soul the Sulfur of Spirit," in *The Essential James Hillman: A Blue Fire*, ed. Thomas Moore (Great Britain: Routledge, 1990), p.190.

<sup>376</sup> Hillman, "The Salt of Soul the Sulfur of Spirit," p.190.

<sup>377</sup> Hillman, *Alchemical Psychology: Uniform Edition of the Writings of James Hillman*, 5, p.13.

<sup>378</sup> Hillman, *Alchemical Psychology: Uniform Edition of the Writings of James Hillman*, 5, p.14.

entanglements that required a necessity for sticking with the trouble, messiness, and fluctuating energies. In staying open to their making, the muddy shapes acted like guides to the process as the clay inside grew in numbers and the time for stacking and searching together with them for some semblance of their becoming shapes slowly emerged. It was a gentle, unhurried process that I experienced as a daily ritual of playful exploration. Hillman suggests that what is inferred through alchemy is a kind of materially dreaming with matter, that through its “*therapeutic effect*: it forces metaphor upon us,”<sup>379</sup> and attending to and improvising with the muddy shapes there was a sense in the activities of the handwork that the substance “carried meanings about nature, life, death, and the soul.”<sup>380</sup> There would be no failures here as their delicate structures were to be expected and any broken or damaged ones simply returned to its fluid state to start over again.



Figure 79: Experiments and Failures with Cracks in the Mud, image by Kerryn Sylvia

The negative space of the everyday slowly revealed its forms of the domestic realm, the shapes, like small ghostly grey offerings and reminders of ordinary familial activities and the enmeshing of intersubjective experiences in daily life. Slowly the muddy apparitions cohered together allowing the energy of each stack to come to light and revealing the shape of each unique story as they stacked up on top of each other, ascending humbly and precariously gently adding to this layering or palimpsest of knowledges and development over time. Caroline Richards in *The Crossing Point Selected Talks and Writing* (1973) tells us that “only with the inner eye of imagination can we see inner forms of Being and Becoming”<sup>381</sup> and in the process of making this meant staying open to improvisational and material forces of the forms as they

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<sup>379</sup> Hillman, *Alchemical Psychology: Uniform Edition of the Writings of James Hillman*, 5, p.16.

<sup>380</sup> Hillman, *Alchemical Psychology: Uniform Edition of the Writings of James Hillman*, 5, p.13.

<sup>381</sup> Richards, *The Crossing Point Selected Talks and Writings*, p.120.

gravitated towards one another, each totemic stack feeling for its own silent knowledge of readiness and each transferring to me what Richards describes as “feeling as a mode of knowledge.”<sup>382</sup>

While these objects were growing my focus of attention was constantly being pulled into my children’s real-time, and sticky personal crises of adolescence. As catalysts for the work and through my interactions with the mud, the first principles of stacking objects became visceral to my mothering mind and memories of playing such games with the children as infants. The clay objects seemed to hold an essence of the creative kinds of play children engage in when they are off in sand pits and mud piles, with a wide-eyed wonder and innocence for the world and tendency towards immersive and sensorily embodied connections with nature. It is a period of paying intimate and imaginatively close attention to things and of an endless fascination with simple materials, matter, and the immediacy of sensations that we worry our current societal preoccupation and engagement with technology is drastically changing and thought to negate. Nicholas Carr, the writer of *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains* (2010) cautions that in entrenching technology into our lives “we are welcoming the frenziedness into our souls.”<sup>383</sup> and not only risking capacity towards an attentive, calm, and deep-thinking mind but also towards the cultivation of a society capable of “empathy and compassion.”<sup>384</sup> Perhaps also and unconsciously the actions of making serve to confuse the lines of memory and in some way pick up on resonances of my own very early childhood experiences of such fundamental developmental processes.

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<sup>382</sup> Richards, *The Crossing Point Selected Talks and Writings*, p.5.

<sup>383</sup> Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains*, p.222.

<sup>384</sup> Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains*, p.220.



Figure 80: Mud Stacks before Bisque Fire, 2021, image by Kerryn Sylvia



Figure 81: Mud Stacks, Colour Transformation after Bisque Fire, 2021, image by Kerryn Sylvia

## Red clay becoming

The fired material also revealed itself anew through the extreme and unexpected transformation the objects underwent in colour within the kiln from greyish brown to a reddish orange, the colour changes reflective of the potentiality towards such radical shifts within both inner psychological developments and outer physical landscapes. I refer to the colour as ‘dust storm’ red which is a familiar and constant presence in terms of dramatic weather events across the Mallee landscape, with their palpable and alarming frequency all invasive as a collective source of anxiety in terms of environmental concerns and degradation. Particles of iron are thought to have oxidised the clay during the bisque firing process making visible the alchemical poetry of its embedded, natural impurities and reflecting the red earth colour that local First Nations Australian communities have long held knowledges of within the Sunraysia area and Mallee region. While the etymology of the area is thought to connect with several local First Nations dialects it is the Latje and Barkindji nations, their elders and custodians,

whose interpretations of the word 'Mildura' centre around 'red earth, red rock, or red dust.'<sup>385</sup> The force of action and radical transformation of the objects during the firing process was an alchemical gift, as if the inner realm of my imagination and contemplations on transformational potential were made tangibly visible. I experienced the unpredictability of firing as a metaphor for meaningful interior changes that occur within crisis rites, evocative of what *The Book of Symbols* (2010) describes as "an invisible fire animating our substance and manifesting in the multiple flickers and excitations of psychic life."<sup>386</sup>

While the firing dramatically altered the stacked casts, it also made them slightly more robust than they were in their raw and infantile grey mud surfaces. Pondering the dramatic and vibrant changes in colour the casts underwent was another unexpected part to the process that thrilled like a feeling of enchantment. The poeticism in this wonderous transformation made me think of adolescence like a dust storm. It rolls through and seems to charge everything with a blanket of its own intensity and self-absorption. It is all pervasive, its effects felt everywhere and nowhere all at once. It is both mesmerizingly beautiful but also epitomises an extreme of Douglas's prompts towards dirt's true indiscriminate character as a substance of formlessness "also credited with powers, some dangerous, some good."<sup>387</sup>

## Textures of play

In documenting *Teen Stacks: Structures Beyond Words* (2022) I experienced the cast and piled shapes as a collective of individuations,<sup>388</sup> that danced around within memory, making, and imagining connections that come from allowing time to really engage with something, to see their shapes as being like *this or that*, and rich with poetic nuances.

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<sup>385</sup> "About Mildura," National Empowerment Project, accessed 20 April, 2022, <https://www.nationalempowermentproject.org.au/about-mildura>.

<sup>386</sup> Ami. Martin Ronnberg, Kathleen, ed., *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2010), p.82.

<sup>387</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, p.118.

<sup>388</sup> In their glossary of terms Dr Neufeld and Dr Maté refer to both individuation and individuality as "the process of becoming individual, distinct and differentiated from others, and viable as a separate human being." p.302 It is not to be confused with the term individualism or used as "the opposite of community, as opposed to the prerequisite for true community." Gordon Maté Neufeld, *Gabor Hold onto your kids why parents need to matter more than peers* (United Kingdom: Vermilion, 2019), pp.301-02.



Figure 82: Kerry Sylvia, *Teen Stacks: Structures Beyond Words* (individual detail)  
2022, bisque fired river mud/clay

I glimpsed something in their formations and at first felt a compulsion to name them as they revealed themselves to me; feet, toy, spinning top, breasts, penis, mushroom, vessel, boat, toy, shuttlecock, tree, mother, candle, body, boat, eye, child; but the words went as fast as I could dream them up and along with them any interest in thinking of them through language. Instead, I resigned to allow them to simply be what they are, casts of small humble things, the stuff of the everyday and suggestive of inner worlds, stories, and events. I viewed them as celebrations of the spirit of place that also required an investment in the practice of attention, invoked through intimate observation and time. Richards tells us that “since most of our living is unconscious, play is like match strokes in the void, bringing into light the structures we behave

by, illuminating for us, however briefly, our deep meanings.”<sup>389</sup> This feature of play I kept in mind throughout the process of tending to the clay, memories of mimicking my own mother in the kitchen making food, a childhood fascination with playing in dirt and mud dancing in my senses. The repetition in these ritual acts of exploration and growth so relatable to embodied memories of playing with the earth, making mudpies with cousins at Christmas and watching my own children, nieces and nephews engage in the many of those same actions that inspire a sense of timeless wonder, awe, and exploration.

The documentation process went through two iterations, one before firing and one after with the latter incorporating a blue background in contrast with the dust storm red transformation of the objects giving a sense of the intensities of the sky and earth around Mildura on a hot 40-degree summers day. The background colour is also indicative of Hillman’s alchemical psychology where he proposes blue as active and transitional, that the colour “between black and white is like that sadness that emerges from despair as it proceeds towards reflection. Reflection here comes from or takes one into a blue distance, less a concentrated act that we do than something insinuating itself upon us as a quiet removal. This vertical withdrawal is also like an emptying out, the creation of a negative capability, a profound listening.”<sup>390</sup> This series of images was realised through an experimental photobook *trans-form* (2022) where both before and after images are relationally connected and mirror one other through a membrane of liminal betweenness symbolised within each page. The only text in the book is sourced from the American poet Robert Kelly as featured in Hillman who writes:

the soul  
vanishes  
the soul. vanishes. into the shape of things  
-Robert Kelly<sup>391</sup>

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<sup>389</sup> Mary Caroline Richards, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), p.63.

<sup>390</sup> Hillman, *Alchemical Psychology: Uniform Edition of the Writings of James Hillman*, 5, p.97. Note: The original source for this poem could not be located outside of Hillman's book.

<sup>391</sup> Hillman, *Alchemical Psychology: Uniform Edition of the Writings of James Hillman*, 5, p.97. Robert Kelly is an American poet whose original source for this quote unlocatable.



Figure 83: Kerry Sylvia, *trans-form* 2022, 84 pages, 23 x 15 cm, softcover, 2022, self-published photobook

The textures in *Teen Stacks: Structures Beyond Words* (2022) have a simple unostentatious style I relate to the harsh qualities of the mallee landscape from where the matter was collected. Their surfaces reflective of a sense of impermanence which belongs to musician Stephen Nachmanovitch articulation of “the imperfect, the unfinished, the evanescent.”<sup>392</sup> He believes encounters with such stochastic textures and their processes creates a palpable physical reaction that both fascinates and as evidenced by the many comments made in relation to the work, also incite an overwhelming desire feel, touch, or be somehow in direct tactile and

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<sup>392</sup> Nachmanovitch, *The Art of Is Improvising as a Way of Life*, p.174.

sensory engagement with them. Even after firing, although somewhat strengthened the material remains unpredictable and seems to move in relation to other forces and patterns that surround it, as if it has a mind of its own. New barely noticeable hairline cracks appear, and the objects continuously shed from their surfaces a fine dust, leaving evidence of this residue around their bases that gathers over time. This residue is expressive of their fragility and susceptibility to the relentless continuum of environmental, emotional, and affective shifts; moments that occur within the inner realm of possibility towards new meaningful and transformational experiences and events.

Like little losses, the red dust gently drops from their surfaces gently falling around them, reflective of the collective understandings of attention that will also gather throughout the duration through other people's participation in the exhibition. Part of the paradoxical familiar strangeness of these forms is in their unfinished quality that Nachmanovitch explains reveals through a "mixture of form and roughness...some wear and irregularity, some evidence of life."<sup>393</sup> It is as if they are waiting to become something more or other, a next or as yet unknown version of themselves perhaps, like a person in the uncertain middle or liminal phase of a crisis period when, as historian Stephen Greenblatt expresses in his essay 'Liminal States and Transformations' (1995) "the rite itself renders them strange, even to themselves."<sup>394</sup>

## **A ritualised space**

In conceiving of this installation as a ritualistic environment, it acts as a marker event inspired by the journeys of my own adolescent children and the muddied waters of our familial intersubjective experiences. The circular form is designed to illicit a symbolically contemplative approach to the work with seats set either side so that the viewer can sit up close at eye level with the work and slowly take in *Teen Stacks: Structures Beyond Words* (2022) noticing the subtlety's that arrive through attention and time, like the gentle rise and fall of crescendos and diminuendos that cascades through each quadrant of nine objects picking up on the nuances of the symbology of numerology and celestial hierarchies. The installation is a way of imagining a reverence for the wisdoms with the inarticulate, messiness of actions, emotions and entanglements between adolescent angst and midlife mothering, which oscillate

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<sup>393</sup> Nachmanovitch, *The Art of Is Improvising as a Way of Life*, p.181.

<sup>394</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, "Liminal States and Transformations," in *Rites of Passage: Art for the End of the Century*, ed. Stuart Morgan and Frances Morris (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1995), p.63.

and dance precariously together between ambiguities of attentive love, neglect, responsibility, and guilt.

As a countenance to our mediated, consumer driven world and its relentlessly accelerating technological pace of change, this installation calls attention to a need for a deeper connection to passages allowed for meaning making across a lifespan, whether found within significant, or more subtle shifts of transformation. The circular configuration entices the act of circumambulation, to wander around the periphery like a ritual form of walking you might experience in labyrinth walking or other ancient practices used by cultures and faiths as forms of centring, contemplation, and prayer. It also provides for places to sit and rest, to be still and attentive at eye level with the clay stacks, mediating their forms from this locale of intimacy and contemplating their shapes in relation to adolescence and the potentially transformative experiences that shape and mould, but do not define us. Instead, they hold onto us and we to them on our way to living out as many parts of our personality as we can, shedding what we outgrow along the way.

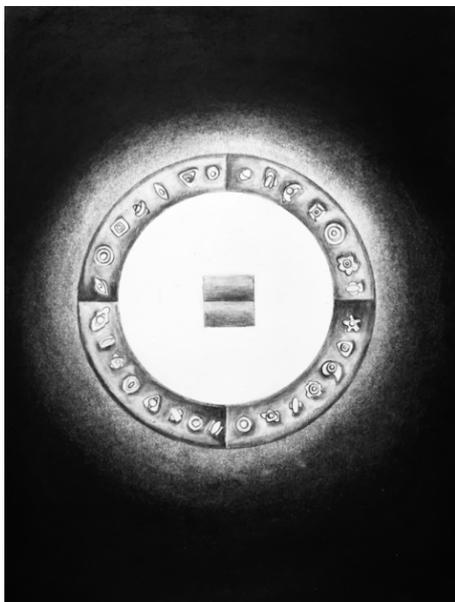


Figure 84: Kerryn Sylvia, *Teen Stacks: Structures Beyond Words* 2022, aerial drawing: plan for installation and lighting, charcoal, soft pastel, graphite

Figure 85: Circular Timber Stands in production: Pine and hardwood, designed by Kerryn Sylvia, constructed by Geoff Leng

Professor Robert Pogue Harrison in the book *Juvenescence* (2014) suggests that a callow neoteny in Western cultural history has rendered a division between youth and age in which

“initiation into the ways of maturity”<sup>395</sup> and responsibility are lost to youth and happen more by way of a survival strategy than through sources of societal intergenerational continuity. He proposes our era’s tendency to set youth and age in facile opposition to one another means we deprive younger generations of the “idleness, shelter and solitude”<sup>396</sup> needed to cultivate an authentically creative life and access generative sources of identity formation and creative imagination. For Pogue Harrison the call inside our heads, pivotal to maturation processes and world renewal, is today drowned out by an “incessant drone that fills the network of globalized interconnection.”<sup>397</sup> Harrison borrows from philosopher Hannah Arendt’s vision of *amor mundi* explaining that “in the interval between childhood and adulthood,”<sup>398</sup> is where these seeds of our relational love for the world should be sewn so that it may come through us. He goes as far as to suggest that what the future depends upon is a process of transmission with the world where the young can withdraw into thought so that *amor mundi* can “gain a proper foothold among them...to elicit in the young the kind of devotion that would turn them into its keepers.”<sup>399</sup>

Nachmanovitch further explains this transmission process through an attentiveness cultivated in art to the accumulation in relationships between patterns, organic processes and interconnections, where in “embracing the way nature operates, we find ourselves accepting the offers of the environment, accepting that we are indissoluble from our environment, becoming conscious of each other and everything around us.”<sup>400</sup> A depth of ethically driven attention is theorised by philosopher Simone Weil in her essay ‘Attention and Will’ (2002) who writes of this concentration of awareness as a way of keeping in contact with the truth, of liberating the energy within us and turning “it on to that which cannot be conceived.”<sup>401</sup> Weil’s concept of attention highlights our human obligation for generosity that allows us to read the world as sacred, “for understanding images, symbols, etc. Not to try to interpret them, but to look at them till the light suddenly dawns,”<sup>402</sup> which emerges through a consciously embodied and active sense of receptivity.

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<sup>395</sup> Robert Pogue Harrison, *Juvenescence* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), p.xi.

<sup>396</sup> Harrison, *Juvenescence*, p.xi.

<sup>397</sup> Harrison, *Juvenescence*, p.135.

<sup>398</sup> Harrison, *Juvenescence*, p.132.

<sup>399</sup> Harrison, *Juvenescence*, p.137.

<sup>400</sup> Nachmanovitch, *The Art of Is Improvising as a Way of Life*, p.185.

<sup>401</sup> Simone Weil, "Attention and will " in *Gravity and Grace* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), p.118.

<sup>402</sup> Weil, "Attention and will " p.120.



Figure 86: Kerryn Sylvia, *Teen Stacks: Structures Beyond Words* 2022, Locally harvested bisque fired river clay, wooden stands, seats, Southern Western Group Exhibition, Mildura Arts Centre

## Totem to totemic

My original impulse was to refer to these objects as ‘Teen Totems’ but upon deeper reflection it seemed more apt to refer to them as totemic following a definition given by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “of, relating to, suggestive of, or characteristic of a totem or totemism.”<sup>403</sup> Remaining sensitive to First Nations cultural connections to totemism, rites and forms of ritual is important to me when engaging with any search for and production of contemporary forms of reinvention and renewal for these transitional phases of passage. First Nations societies operate on other temporal registers and understandings of the world’s rhythms with ritualised experiences essential in connecting with larger evolutionary purposes. In his book *Sand Talk How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World* (2019), First Nation academic Tyson Yunkaporta writes of song lines as webbed forces and “maps of story carrying knowledge along the lines of energy that manifest as Law in the mind and land as one.”<sup>404</sup> They offer an opening in structured Westernised societal space for exploration into the wisdom

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<sup>403</sup> Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “totemic,” accessed May 2, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/totemic>.

<sup>404</sup> Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World*, p.2.

and complexity of the world beyond our current commodified systems of knowledge production. This is First Nations way of doing, being, and knowing within kinship structures, ritual, and the communal, the catharsis of such experiences remaining more elusive to the course of a life within our contemporary societal structures.

Chance, chaos, and complexity play a part in the way many of us find rites of passage experiences of transformative potential in our current Western cultural malaise. These may occur randomly, via accident or incident, or as a ritualised gap in the framework of our social blueprint that we stumble across rather than orchestrate. Less and less, it seems that we take the time to create these experiences of communal and supportive passages for each other. I propose that rites of passage and their rituals are not as visible in our current societal structures as they once were and that there is a necessity for reinvention of and improvisation with these sticky, vital liminal spaces. Conflating the domestic with the totemic exposes possibilities and potentials for connecting with First Nations spiritual and environmental ways of knowing that go beyond our delusions of the human species as the centre of the universe and I share in this desire to understand our existence and our mortality, of the purpose ritual holds in explaining moments of life, in marking and imbuing them with meaning outside of the barrage of distractions that constitute current instances of contemporary life. In a very primary way, it is this cultivation of personal knowledge with community and ancestral connections that ceremonies or rituals in rites of passage attend to. While I acknowledge there are many historical instances documented that by today's standards are considered no more than acts of barbarism and practices of mutilation, there is that other sense to such passages providing space for slowing down and adopting a mindset of attentiveness to the aliveness and intoxicating enchantment of things, and experiencing ourselves in relation with these things, however disorientating, discombobulating, strange, and wonderous they may seem.

## Precarious materials



Figure 87: Cecilia Vicuña, *Cementerio [Cemetery]* 1982, precarious object, mixed media, wood, and bones, <http://www.ceciliavicuna.com/objects/vgqjecu8v8xrbclvzt7tgnbmfhqhpb>

Poet, artist, and activist Cecilia Vicuña is thought of in terms of the connections she makes, among other elements, that go beyond body, bricolage, and dust, and writes in one of her many artist books of poetic musings and images *QUIPoem* (1997) “an object is not an object, it is the witness to a relationship,”<sup>405</sup> and for my own practice there is a strong ring and resonance of truth to this statement. This poetic description expresses something of how I feel about these humble and roughly hued stacks that have grown out of and along with a mutuality of relational forces, memories, resonances and events in liminal time and space. In the scope of this project, they act as a sticky muddiness, a precarious togetherness of offerings, honouring, remaining attentive, and staying with the challenges and unpredictability’s of these palpable experiences and qualities of adolescent liminal antistructure and uncertainty. A native of Chile,

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<sup>405</sup> Cecilia Vicuña, "QUIPoem ", ed. Catherine de Zegher (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997), q.136.

Vicuña's comprehension of indigenous ontologies and forms of knowledge create a diversity of artworks that challenge the imposition of Western social structures and views, revealing of space beyond the limitations and consciousness of social structure.

Curator Migel Lopez in his essay 'Cecilia Vicuña: A Retrospective for Eyes That Do Not See' (2019) explains that for Vicuña paying attention to the emergence of the spontaneous poetic event is "a by-product of physical connections, arising from the inventive and usually unfettered aspects of the very act of living."<sup>406</sup> Such improvised forms of poetry become compositions that allow Vicuña to reclaim oral and traditional cultural values of her Chilean roots "in which people are just part of a landscape of far broader and more complex forces and powers. That *other poetry* - which may be an ecology - has no name of its own and, belonging to no one, is shared by everyone."<sup>407</sup> Lopez suggests her search for a poetry of simplicity, gestures, and forces is connected to "the creation of new life in a blaze of mutual sharing,"<sup>408</sup> where aesthetic experience is something felt inside; swept up in life's energy flows. He attests to Vicuña's artwork as a practice of affectively bearing witness and making offerings to the existence of the world evidenced through her small, humble assemblages that first originated in 1966 as ephemeral constructions. As a way of honouring a sense balance and reciprocity with the natural world,<sup>409</sup> these works of found and collected debris, were made to disappear back into the environment from which they came.

In *QUIPoem* (1997) the artist explains these objects of sacred symbolic offerings stating "when I said *arte precario* an energy was born. The two words transformed each other. Doing (*ars*) became prayer (*precis*), and prayer, doing. The precarious was transformation, Prayer is change, 'the dangerous instant of transmutation.'"<sup>410</sup> Lopez describes Vicuña's perception of the creative act as a cyclical process that plays a role in contemplating forms of common vulnerability and rallying against more controlling and dominating neoliberal economies and

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<sup>406</sup> Miguel A. Lopez, "Cecilia Vicuña: A Retrospective For Eyes That Do Not See," in *Seehearing the Enlightened failure*, ed. Migel A. Lopez (Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 2019), p.16.

<sup>407</sup> Lopez, "Cecilia Vicuña: A Retrospective For Eyes That Do Not See," p.17.

<sup>408</sup> Lopez, "Cecilia Vicuña: A Retrospective For Eyes That Do Not See," p.19.

<sup>409</sup> Lopez, "Cecilia Vicuña: A Retrospective For Eyes That Do Not See," p.19.

<sup>410</sup> Vicuña, "QUIPoem " q.136. In Vicuña's artist book which is turned upside down and begins from the back of the book, the pages are numbered with a q. serving as a small attention to detail that further connects with the poeticism of the overall book. This section of writing is also dated from 1996 which differs from the publishing date of 1997.

security issues,<sup>411</sup> with her structural modifications to found materials like those of the *precarios* more akin to improvisational rehearsals attending to an intuitive compulsion for arranging these fragile found objects. He explains that Vicuña experiences them through “the relational dimension of precariousness (inherent to both non-human and human beings),”<sup>412</sup> with her work defying conventional standardised art historical categories due to their delicate, ethereal qualities.

An example of this is evidenced in *Cementerio* [Cemetery] (1982) with its asymmetrically balanced composition of found and altered objects that seem somehow otherworldly, emblematic of totems and sacred powers. Professor Julia Bryan-Wilson in *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (2017) elaborates on this stating that “Vicuña’s artistic work, with its transitory filaments, summoning of ancient epistemologies, and tattered cloth, has not yet been widely institutionalized,”<sup>413</sup> although as evidenced by a spate of solo shows ongoing since (2017) titled *Cecilia Vicuña: About to Happen*, and her inclusion as a finalist in the Guggenheims prestigious Hugo Boss Prize (2020), these conversations have begun, and her professional career is flourishing. Bryan-Wilson suggests that qualities of change and impermanence at the heart of her work are not “prized by the art market or museum, and her witchy, womanly slant has meant that her *precarios* have sometimes been dismissed as strange charms rather than serious sculptures.”<sup>414</sup>

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<sup>411</sup> Lopez, "Cecilia Vicuña: A Retrospective For Eyes That Do Not See," p.40.

<sup>412</sup> Lopez, "Cecilia Vicuña: A Retrospective For Eyes That Do Not See," p.40.

<sup>413</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), p.113.

<sup>414</sup> Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, p.114.



Figure 88: Cecilia Vicuña, *Precarios* 1966-2017, Site-specific installation: 110-112 found-object sculptures: stone, shells, glass, wood, plastic, thread, debris, Presented in field of sand and along the wall on small shelves made of wood, dimensions variable, from *About to Happen*, 2017, Contemporary Arts Centre, New Orleans, Photo by Alex Marks, <https://icaphila.org/exhibitions/cecilia-vicuna-about-to-happen/>

Bryan-Wilson refers to these works as “amuletlike sculptures”<sup>415</sup> and she also proposes that the artist “never meant her precario objects to be literal spells but rather material workings-through, or affective outlets, of first her hope and later her grief,”<sup>416</sup> towards ecological and environmental concerns. Such gatherings of ephemeral and quotidian scraps, remnants, and refuse might be considered as small totems of poetic storytelling like, “potent gestures or ‘little prayers,’”<sup>417</sup> that remain allusively political through their qualities of fragility and disintegration but also respectively make a case for anti-colonial forms of engagement. Vicuña precarious compositions remind us of the transformational potential that resides even within the humblest materials and cast offs of refuse and rubbish that reveal through her constructions a numinous sacred quality at play in their material gatherings.

<sup>415</sup> Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, p.129.

<sup>416</sup> Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, p.126.

<sup>417</sup> Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, p.118.

Lucy Lippard in 'Spinning the Common Thread' (2019), explains that Vicuña has been recreating or rehearsing the *precarios* throughout her artistic life, suggesting they are sequences she returns to as "the common formal thread"<sup>418</sup> that runs throughout her activist and ecologically motivated oeuvre of works. As something she was compelled to as a form of communion with landscape and the elements, Lippard describes the *precarios* as juxtapositions of detritus like "visual poems, 'metaphors in space'"<sup>419</sup> with their own spiritual elements derived through processes of making and drawing attention to what we leave behind. As collection of markers and offerings her work crosses cultural boundaries and disciplines creating instead "a terrain of her own in the interstices."<sup>420</sup> Through my own processes of making, I can also locate a certain striving for connection with manifestations of the spiritual, and components of a topography belonging to qualities of liminality. As a working methodology an awareness of ritual improvisation is fostered keeping the process open to a plethora of possibilities mediated through materials and the memories, histories, and allegorical transformational potentials they hold.

Although discussion around individual works of the *precarios* is limited, Lippard does refer to her work *La Falda de la Momia* [Mummy's Skirt] (1987), describing it as one of the artists old, faded garments and one of the few personal artifacts alluded to within her collection of small fragile sculptures. Lippard tells us it "looks like an archaeological piece,"<sup>421</sup> with the patina of the skirt's fabric stained and degraded, as if it has been dug up from the ground. Its surface holds evidence of the very passing of the ravages of time and the forces of natural elements. The object is suspended over a hidden armature that provides only a glimpse of its construction beneath that seems to be cobbled together out of sticks, string, and feathers, its absence animating the form and giving it an embodied resonance of mystical or spiritual presence. The skirt is sparsely adorned with fragments of culturally and symbolically significant objects that act like and might be considered as amulets. These include scraps of felted fabric or wool, small, embroidered patches and stitches of red thread, a fine yellow cord of knots or braiding, and stones attached to cover what looks like possible tears or holes. One small red pom-pom, reflective of the artists culturally native Chilean costumes holds

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<sup>418</sup> "Spinning the Common Thread," in *Seehearing the Enlightened failure*, ed. Migel A. Lopez (Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art 2019), p.101.

<sup>419</sup> "Spinning the Common Thread," p.98.

<sup>420</sup> "Spinning the Common Thread," p.95.

<sup>421</sup> "Spinning the Common Thread," p.105.

awkwardly onto the surface, yet another adornment of compositional precariousness that dangles from the form, adding to a haptic feedback of material forces at play in the work.



Figure 89: Cecilia Vicuña, *La Falda de la Momia* [Mummy Skirt] 1987, precarious object, mixed media, cloth, dye, and found objects, in *Seehearing the Enlightened Failure*, edited by Migel A. Lopez, Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, 2019

Like things excavated from an archaeological dig, another context for the muddy insides turned outside are explored again through the work *Journeying to the Self of Someplace Else* (2022) where they become a collection of repetitious but unique boat-like forms suspended atop of wooden on stands. The objects rest on a coloured top section that mimics their shapes and could be read as sky, water, or be a representation of the psyche from Hillman's alchemical

ruminations on the colour blue, expressions of which he explains as delicate and transitional, “the colour of imagination tout court.”<sup>422</sup> where the creative power of consciousness is at play. Installed in the corner of a room, they project outwards, as if they are heading out into the world like interstitial persons journeying out from some middle spatiality of liminal quality and ambiguity. The essence of the installation remains hopeful, insinuating movement that belongs to notions of adventuring and personal inner journeying. It creates a visual poetic for the idiosyncratic transformational voyage through adolescence that each of us is called to take, singularly adrift and yet each collectively gathered on top of a little “blue bridge of metaphor” the terra firma of imaginal primacy for Hillman whose “appearance in the world brings a primordial shading to all existence, beginning the world anew from and for imagination.”<sup>423</sup>

## **Journeying and worlding**

Mothering the sticky muddy contexts of adolescent passage means embracing events and situations as they arise, inclusive of life’s messiness and heightened emotions of events. Professor of anthropology Kathleen Stewart in her monograph ‘Afterword: Worlding Refrains’ (2010) poetically defines accumulative repetitions and emerging forms of worlding as a socially attuned aesthetics of opening to the sharpening and shimmers of attention and expressivity. Her prose draws attention to the generative sources and sediments of affective relations where “everything depends on the dense entanglement of affect, attention, the senses, and matter.”<sup>424</sup> These create the compositional and rhymical events of the present, inclusive of the temporalities and suspensions of intervals and disorientations like those within liminal passages and moments. Stewart uses her notion of bloom spaces to describe the paradoxical promise, allure, and threat that compels us toward a collective attunement with “learning the sensory labour of worlding”<sup>425</sup> and becoming immersed in the affective dimension of its ubiquitous and nascent nature. Both bloom spaces and liminality can be thought of in terms of this compulsion that calls us towards a heightened sensory communion with things, and as Stewart explains to “forms of attending to what’s happening, sensing out, accreting attachments and detachments, differences and indifferences, losses and proliferating

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<sup>422</sup> Hillman, *Alchemical Psychology: Uniform Edition of the Writings of James Hillman*, 5, p.109.

<sup>423</sup> Hillman, *Alchemical Psychology: Uniform Edition of the Writings of James Hillman*, 5, pp.117-18.

<sup>424</sup> Stewart, "AFTERWORD Worlding Refrains," p.340.

<sup>425</sup> Stewart, "AFTERWORD Worlding Refrains," p.341

possibilities.”<sup>426</sup> It is these metaphoric muddy vessels that I attend to and as the title of the work suggests, that are metaphorically *Journeying to the Self of Someplace Else* (2022). Out into these bloom spaces of potential, transition, and loss, they sail on currents of meaning making, as hopeful symbolic forms emerging out of resonances and intensities within the terra forma of identity formation.



Figure 90: Kerry Sylvia, *Journeying to the Self of Someplace Else* (detail) 2022, bisque fired river mud, wooden stands, acrylic paint, from the exhibition *Liminal* 2022 Mildura Arts Centre

In conclusion the contexts for liminal qualities are connected to the muddy substance both before and after casts and moulds have generated its reshaping in remnants of the domestic sphere of daily familial use. In mothering the mud, tending to it and the other elemental conditions of energies and forces that it give it time to take shape the substance reveals itself while also retaining an ambiguousness that keeps it connected to symbolic associations and qualities of liminal experiential passage. Mud in the context of liminality reveals itself to be a sticky substance of possibilities in the context of casting, shaping, and moulding, for

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<sup>426</sup> Stewart, "AFTERWORD Worliding Refrains," p.344.

reinventing and reconnecting to the soil, personhood, and society. Whether stacks or vessels, the shapes imply an intimate relational connection with transformational processes and ways of becoming in the world, seeking, and searching for a sense of personhood which is a developmental action of both hope and struggle.

## Chapter 5: The Forest

Time passes unnoticed, until that moment when we suddenly turn and all seems transformed, even the earth beneath our feet. **Patti Smith**<sup>427</sup>



Figure 91: Kerry Sylvia, *Foresting the Uncertain Middle* (installation view) 2022, from the exhibition *Liminal* 2022 at Mildura Arts Centre, photo by Lisa Guzzardi

This chapter explores an atmospheric conception of the liminal through the installation of works in *Foresting the Uncertain Middle* (2022) an installation of transformed and multifarious meandering objects, elements, and materials conveying a subjunctive mood of offerings that paradoxically both derives from the ordinary but also lies out of these more mundane realms of the experience and meaning making. This is not a metaphoric forest of old growth, but one that belongs to ecological processes and cycles of forest succession, like a secondary forest in the process of new growth rather than old. This is a forest that philosopher Catherine Clément in her book *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture* (1994) explains as a leftover illusory metaphor that “is not necessarily thick and does not necessarily have the shady tree-field appearance that we imagine when we hear the magic word ‘forest.’ As in our

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<sup>427</sup> Patti Smith, *Just Kids Illustrated Edition* (Great Britain: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), p.xi.

collective imagination, however, it is an untamed and infinite space that allegorically represents the immensity of the void. All that is not village is forest.”<sup>428</sup>

The title for the installation is taken from a fusion of Victor Turner’s book *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of the Ndembu Ritual*<sup>429</sup> (1967) and a line taken from Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña in her artist book of documents and poems, *QUIPoem*<sup>430</sup> (1997) where she writes of the uncertain middle as a precariously exposed and hazardous space of insecurities. Although the local mallee environment is referred to predominately as bushland, both terms allude to a sense of the wilderness in an uncultivated state with the notion of a forest being a more universally symbolic term not restricted to any specific locality. Literary professor Robert Pogue Harrison in *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (1992) suggests that to the Western cultural imagination the forest is a place of paradoxes that “appears as a place where the logic of distinction goes astray. Or where our subjective categories are confounded. Or where perceptions become promiscuous with one another, disclosing latent dimensions of time and consciousness.”<sup>431</sup>

With its sacred and enchanted dimensions, the forest belongs to mythic realms and the stuff of childhood fairy tales which Pogue Harrison explains as both “an indispensable resource of symbolisation in the cultural evolution of humankind.”<sup>432</sup> The experience of a forest remains confusing to human orientation as it is wild, untamed, and lies beyond horizons of linear time, resisting the imposed rigidity of institutional and structural orders. In Pogue Harrison’s narration of the forest’s poetic history this loss of temporal boundaries is both terrifying and enchanting. It holds a capacity towards engaging on a deeper level with a sense of our own human ecologies reflected back to us through its cycles of generation and decay that convey an “instinctive knowledge of dying.”<sup>433</sup> He maintains that what is lost to us today is the translation of the word *logos* which is now given to us through language rather than its original etymology as that “which binds, gathers, or relates...to nature in the mode of openness and difference.”<sup>434</sup>

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<sup>428</sup> Clément, *Syncopa: The Philosophy of Rapture*, pp.166-67.

<sup>429</sup> Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*.

<sup>430</sup> Vicuña, "QUIPoem " p.xi.

<sup>431</sup> Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.x.

<sup>432</sup> Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, p.8.

<sup>433</sup> Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, p.249.

<sup>434</sup> Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, p.200.

While people and populations used to be in deep relationship with death and the ancestral cultures and ecologies that connect us, in Westernised cultures today it seems we may have forgotten how to dwell in spaces between life and death and are bereft of such relations between forests and memory. Living within current structures that attempt to commodify and capitalise on anything and everything, even notions of liminality might be considered overused with a plethora of different academic disciplines hijacking and applying the term to suit some version of a threshold concept. Despite this it remains a struggle to find another word that might better express what Jungian analyst Terrill L. Gibson in *The Liminal and the Luminescent: Jungian Reflections on Ensouled Living Amid a Troubled Era* (2021) refers to as a metaphoric indication of “pure being itself. A state as much as it is a place or time. It is a state both dynamic and static; it flows and it pools. It is Presence. It embraces as much as it is embraced.”<sup>435</sup>

In further discussing an ambivalent attitude of nostalgia applied to forests in today’s world, Pogue Harrison suggests they are places “ringed with a halo of loss”<sup>436</sup> and perhaps liminal spaces, those that lure us to them and still manage to resist societal forms of commodification, are also ringed in such a way where both forests and liminal spaces lie at the metaphorical boundaries of institutional structures and order, sharing in qualities of an uncertain middle of antistructure. The installation *Foresting the Uncertain Middle* (2022) becomes a space indicative of foresting persons and family life in transition, honouring relational thresholds as something mysterious that call us to an appointment with life. The space strives to express something of our relationship with the unseen forces of the world and connection to the real presence of ancestry and acts like a shrine that embraces loss, and the grief of that loss, while also exploring imaginings of the liminal affective and psychological qualities of sound and light.

Gibson expresses the liminal as a place of necessary oppositional tensions, a temporal dwelling place of archetypal energies and an apparent passage for the uniqueness, fullness and “meaning of our individual and collective lives.”<sup>437</sup> Like a shrine of attendance, the installation of the work sits in the realm of a mutuality of experiences where the personal is connected to

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<sup>435</sup> Terrill L. Gibson, *The Liminal and the Luminescent: Jungian Reflections on Ensouled Living Amid a Troubled Era* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2021), p.11.

<sup>436</sup> Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, p.156.

<sup>437</sup> Gibson, *The Liminal and the Luminescent: Jungian Reflections on Ensouled Living Amid a Troubled Era*, p.36.

a wider natural world and social body of transferences. Within this shared emotional and sensory liminal space of psychological entanglements, periods of crisis and turmoil become spaces of new transformational possibilities, supported by affective ameliorative impulses of mothering, and exploring a more polymorphous group of vulnerabilities, anxieties, and uncertainties. This results in the creation of a more triangulated form of relational interstice where visions of mutability are also given room to coalesce and find subversive potential or even primacy beyond the realm of oppositional binary schemata and dualities. This triangular representation of relationships connects with the ambiguities and tensions of the liminal as a kind of emergent thirdness with its own spatial sensibilities which Licata suggests is a middle place we enter relationship with, and in the process discover ourselves “imaginatively, phenomenologically, and experientially within the fire of our direct, embodied experience.”<sup>438</sup>

In foresting the in-between of adolescent events, habits, practices, and situations, the subdued light and shadows in the space plays with a liminal resonance that Gibson explains as the light of psyche which is “constantly imposing its preference for luminescent darkness and shadowed light.”<sup>439</sup> The exhibition format, in honouring and attending to the experiences of others, could be described as an attempt at cultivating a ritualising quality and mood suggestive of an imaginal liminal forest of things and elements, like a community of sensory, visual, and auditory elements, metaphorically attending to more embedded and social notions of identity formation attached to rites of passage experiences. There is an instability to the forms and shapes that coalesce in the space, falling from above, hovering betwixt and between and growing up from the floor towards the middle, unwilling and maybe unable to be confined and to conform to any one static spatiality. Here amongst a dispersal of meandering elements and alchemical remnants, once steady and familiar landmarks become unfamiliar and notions of structural precarity linger within a liminal register of affective topologies. The spatial deployment of the forms and fragmented multiplicity of things, clustering, littering, spiralling, and knotting together are charged by the kinetic body of the viewer through their physical and emotional encounters with the work with the structures dancing, improvising, and coalescing together. Such elements of movement in the room act as subtle reminders that we are always living within a dynamism of such affective entanglements, immersed, and improvising within a concentration of personal and collective energies.

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<sup>438</sup> Licata, *A Healing Space: Befriending Ourselves in Difficult Times*, pp.57-58.

<sup>439</sup> Gibson, *The Liminal and the Luminescent: Jungian Reflections on Ensouled Living Amid a Troubled Era*, p.51.

Finally, from a mothering perspective the installation plays with conceptions of identity that are relational, like a constellation of partially revealed glimpses of the inner psychologically charged and affective stories and experiences of others. It is a loving inquiry of artfully tending to the developing persona who seeks their own nourishment of spirit through heeding the call to transform, and to find out what and who they might become. There is a sense of opening towards the questions and doubt generated in these spaces, of coping and dwelling within the contradictions and incoherence's of such liminal adolescent situations and honouring the continual shifting paradoxical beauty experienced there, with its mingling of struggles and potentials. Gibson preaches for the recovery of liminal space believing that "in our era, the liminal image is voiced in a profoundly feminine register"<sup>440</sup> of deep origins that are compassionate, restorative, embodied and split off from the dominance of post-rational consciousness. What we connect with through Gibson's metaphorical portals acting as delivery vehicles for contemporary experiences of the liminal, is hope for "this deep, authentic, liminal encountering and empathic relating and loving."<sup>441</sup>

A fluid mutability of identities is at play, improvising with who and what is around and attentive to the nuances of perpetually becoming, ongoing shifts in personhood. There is no solving of problems or finding answers here, only offerings. Like gifts, relics, and ritualistic sacred things of the collected, kept, and discarded, these are made in honour of the mysteries of our adolescent developmental processes and the extraordinary glimpses and possibilities they open towards sensing the thin membrane and connective tissue that separates liminal spaces from the perceived realities of everyday life. In focusing on encounters with liminality the easily overlooked stuff of the everyday with its inert forms and materials become poignant repositories of human presence, memory, and time, the work is concerned with materiality, sensuality, process and the relationship between the audience and their environment as an experience that you move through.

Through the opening of these portals as cracks or tears, we slip through the structurally ordered fabric of society to explore space temporarily unencumbered with goals and purpose, but which nonetheless holds its own vitality and enchantment in the construction of meaning, and

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<sup>440</sup> Gibson, *The Liminal and the Luminescent: Jungian Reflections on Ensouled Living Amid a Troubled Era*, p.49.

<sup>441</sup> Gibson, *The Liminal and the Luminescent: Jungian Reflections on Ensouled Living Amid a Troubled Era*, p.3.

the development and extension of our felt identities. Clément, through philosopher Henri Bergson's<sup>442</sup> (1935) theorising of a rupturing attitude belonging to the open soul, reflects on the discontinuity of the journey from the village to the forest as a disturbance "as if human history were capable of dreaming only if broken by brutal syncope and unexpected jolt and could only be analysed afterwards."<sup>443</sup> The liminal is not a place of purposeful conscious choices, it arises within these ruptures, jolts, cracks, or tears that are metaphorically conceived as penetrating forces, disruptive to the social order of the fabric of society, which the next section of this chapter explores through works presented as a gathering of elements and transformed materials within the installation of *Foresting the Uncertain Middle* (2022).

### **Embracing tears in the fabric**

*Embracing* (2022) hangs between the floor and ceiling, the fabrics suspended in actions of holding and enfolding within each other. They are transformed, structurally altered from their domestic situations of use, becoming instead something more unfamiliar through a slow process of heating, distortion, and manipulation. It hovers betwixt and between, above the floor work *Knots as Cosmos of Little Beating Hearts* (2022) in an improvisatory joining and entanglement of things, as if one is an extension of the other or the two are a part of the whole, like interacting patterns at an interface of meeting points where something different happens and possibilities towards the energetic processes of change are perceptible.

Robert L. Moore (2001) outlines transitional space in contemporary research as experientially regenerative. He is concerned with interpreting and reinventing our tools for looking at and finding a heterogeneity of space for experiencing the power of ritual death, deconstruction, and rebirth. While Moore's language in reference to ancient and Indigenous cultural forms of initiation and ritual are outmoded in today's terms, he does offer insights into the importance of ritual wisdoms in inspiring correspondences to the extraordinary and awe inspiring and as a possibility towards addressing problems within today's cultural milieu. He argues that outside of Jungian psychological perspectives contemporary society resists ritualised forms of ego death and that without consideration of "liminal states as integral to human life...new life

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<sup>442</sup> Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashely Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (United States of America: Henry Holt and Company, 1935), pp.30, 56.

<sup>443</sup> Clément, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture*, p.174.

cannot begin to germinate.”<sup>444</sup> Working from historian of religion Mircea Eliade’s<sup>445</sup> ontological point of eruption or interruption of nonhomogeneous sacred space, Moore states “the possibility for regeneration of the world occurs through tears in the fabric of ordinary profane space,”<sup>446</sup> and as the fabric in *Embracing* (2022) transforms, separates, and expands, forced apart by heating processes, there is a sense of it becoming part of such realms of manifested sacred realities and accessibility to regenerative space.



Figure 92: Kerry Sylvia, *Embracing* (installation view) 2022, in *Foresting the Uncertain Middle* from the exhibition *Liminal 2022*, Mildura Arts Centre

<sup>444</sup> Moore, *The Archetype of Initiation: Sacred Space, Ritual Process, and Personal Transformation*, pp.30-31.

<sup>445</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (United States of America: Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc, 1959), p.20. Eliade's terms such tears a hierophany in reference to the appearance of a new point of orientation

<sup>446</sup> Moore, *The Archetype of Initiation: Sacred Space, Ritual Process, and Personal Transformation*, p.24.

The previous state of the fabric is in effect destroyed to be replaced by a new emergent state of materiality, symbolic of the fabric of the world made unfamiliar to itself and becoming instead brittle, plastic, and revealing of the separation and fall into a liminal state with all its complexities and qualitative differences. In rupturing the surface there is a process at play allowing for openings into things and making space for shadows to dwell, existing as their own points of focus and meaning. The surfaces and textures reveal themselves as metaphorically symbolic forms of societal tears in the cloth where the surface is subjected to forces of heating and melting and manipulation, pushed to a tipping point of tension right before total disintegration. Once useful household objects such as tablecloths, doona covers and curtains, the cloth transforms, becomes hard, abrasive, unstable and fragile, almost no longer fabric at all but some other thing belonging to the vagaries and vagueness of the unfamiliar and unknown. Watching it transform encapsulates something of the regenerative and degenerative processes of life and it is like witnessing the death of the fabric to its previous state and rebirth into newness.

There is a sense of dancing between an initial sense of the uncontrollable that gives way to a process of going along with the action as it settles into something more contemplative and generative. There is a satisfaction in watching the openings randomly and uncontrollably appear, the surfaces transformed from threads and weaves to fusions that are more congealed, translucent, and fragile. Something less recognisable and new begins to take shape and there is a sense of drawing with the heat gun that creates a surface patterning of active and passive tensions where every perforation also retains and holds, however tenuously, its own uniqueness of shape. The process of transforming the surfaces using heat pushes the fabrics to the limits of their capacity to keep holding on and stay connected to themselves. Following along with the haphazardness of the action requires an openness towards improvising with the changes in surface structure that push towards some potential destructive force always just hovering quietly between perceived illusions of stasis in structural certainties. In remaining attentive to and waiting for newness to emerge, abandoning any hope or totality of command or control over the process means embracing the ruptures of random shifts and changes as they slowly occur across the surface, going along with the materials energies and transformational forces. Thoughts arise throughout the process of photographer Hans Namuth's famous film

*Jackson Pollock*<sup>447</sup> (1951) with footage of him painting captured from beneath onto a clear pane of glass, and I strain to resist responding to an urge to film this transformational heating process from a similar vantage point. While Pollock's action painting was an additive process this form of fabric manipulation felt more subtractive, a kind of reverse fusing process with the material finding its own rhythms of improvisation and movement.



Figure 93: Experimentation with Heating Fabric Process: Discarded Kitchen Curtain (2019) image by Kerry Sylvia

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<sup>447</sup> Namuth Hans and Flakenberg Paul, "Jackson Pollock," (USA, 1951).  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atu4uVT7bV8>.

The forces and energies between my bodily actions and materials were revealed through the opening of negative space as a kind of resistance to processes, with areas moving and disappearing, disintegrating, and dissolving before my eyes. There was a sense of watching the weave of this manmade material fuse together and move beyond a point of stability; to start to pull away from itself in chaotic and unpredictable movements and allowing its haphazard permeations to unfold in their own time, revelling in its own transformative and unique variations while I followed along with the movement and rhythm of the fabric. Attempting to harness and hold back the process was like a protective action of stopping tears from opening so far into space that there was no possibility of return which I connect to Moore's description of "chronic liminality"<sup>448</sup> and the possibility of spending too much time or becoming stuck in liminal passages of psychic birth and ego deconstruction. It is Moore's assertion that such states of prolonged dwelling belong to Turner's distinction between liminal and limonoid space, with the latter a more unsupported form in contemporary societies that can result in the possibility of failed psychological initiations and rebirths.

Crafting connotations of transformational heating processes place the fabric in the realm of textile art where fabric fusing techniques remain separated from current definitions of fine art. Despite this exclusion the process I follow allows for the surface to take on new textures and shapes and move beyond its functional utility in becoming something less recognisably domestic and more connected to the symbolic dimensions of the sacred. In the book *Poetic Cloth* (2019) textile artist Hannah Lamb connects with the intimacies and qualities of fabrics where handling the material gives insight into its subtle resonances of history and stories inspiring an "emotional way of thinking...reminding us of particular places, people, and occasions."<sup>449</sup> Within Lambs' poesies of cloth, materials hold an ability to communicate and speak to us provoking tactile dimensions of tacit knowledge and a "shared material language."<sup>450</sup> The inherent symbolism of the cloth is enhanced or touched through making processes, expressive of personal experiences and triggering associations that allow it to occupy meanings suggestive of psychological and narrative dimensions. These symbolic qualities and meanings of the fabric are associated with the ordinary rituals and routines belonging to the intimacies of familial life that Lamb suggests play as "a silent witness to our daily lives, our most intimate, humdrum, celebratory and troubling times."<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>448</sup> Moore, *The Archetype of Initiation: Sacred Space, Ritual Process, and Personal Transformation*, p.31.

<sup>449</sup> Hannah Lamb, *Poetic Cloth: Creating Meaning in Textile Art* (Great Britain: Batsford, 2019), p.6.

<sup>450</sup> Lamb, *Poetic Cloth: Creating Meaning in Textile Art*, p.7.

<sup>451</sup> Lamb, *Poetic Cloth: Creating Meaning in Textile Art*, p.10.



Figure 94: Hannah Lamb, *In Search of Green* (installation detail) 2013, <https://www.textileartist.org/hannah-lamb-interview-a-kind-of-gentle-presence/hannah-lamb-textile-artist-in-search-of-green-installation-detail-2013/>

While Lamb considers herself a textile artist that constrains her work to a truth to materials through cloth, I prefer to think in more fluid terms about things as they present themselves. Artists such as Louise Bourgeois, whose work is discussed further in Chapter Four: The Church, place few limitations on which materials hold possibilities for exploration into the emotional dynamics and psycho/socio-material dimensions of art processes as they respond to life's experiences. Curator Marie-Laure Bernadac in her book *Louise Bourgeois* (1996) tells us that "Bourgeois has often stated that she is indifferent to materials, that she does not believe in their so-called truth, that for her they are merely tools, a simple means of expression and not an end in itself."<sup>452</sup> This connection with the emotional potency and content of materials over the formal spans a long career in the work of the artist where enduring motifs display symbolic content within a multitude of abstracted forms like staged interactions revealing of the artists "hypersensitivity to both objects and feelings, (including the most ambiguous of

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<sup>452</sup> Bernadac, *Louise Bourgeois*, p.62.

human relations).”<sup>453</sup> Similarly *Foresting the Uncertain Middle* (2022) engages with materials and emotional resonances; the discarded, transitional, and functional things from my children’s experiences, habits and events rooted in both memory and biography that coalesce in the cathexis of a belief in rites and the role they hold they potential to play in the fabric of developmental processes and social structures. The materials act as tools for patterning, improvising, giving meaning to adolescent struggles and potentials of liminal states in mutually affecting experiential entanglements with mothering.

### Heating, alchemy and letting go



Figure 95: Studio experiments with heat treated materials (2020-2021), image by Kerryn Sylvia

Earlier experiments with the heat-treated surfaces were fixed to the walls of the studio as a collective of individual works exploring the potential of their natural falls, folds, and drapery, with the forms reminiscent of spiritual or religious iconographies and perhaps in some way inspired by many years of exposure and familiarity with the history of art and classical

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<sup>453</sup> Bernadac, *Louise Bourgeois*, p.10.

religious paintings. These first attempts to follow the flow of the material forms felt contrived and more controlled than they needed to be, as if they had not yet found their way to something that responded to notions of liminality with a greater sense of authenticity that might free them from these initial and more obviously religious connections. Around this time musicians Roger and Brian Eno put a call out for entries into their collaborative ambient audio-visual project *A Quiet Scene* (2020) to accompany their *Mixing Colours* (2020) recording which came during a COVID-19 lockdown providing an opportunity to exhibit online through their platform from a place of shared isolation. In responding to this project, the heat-treated materials were hung outside from trees in the front garden of the family home, let loose amongst and activated by the elements of wind and the play of the sun across their surfaces, captured in slow motion video dancing to the Eno brothers ambient musical track *Cinnabar* (2020).



 Kerryn Sylvia

 The front door of our home is the center of the frame and reminiscent of the cinnabar color as the golden disc dances in the wind among the trees and falling autumn leaves, revealing and obscuring the entrance we never use.

 Mildura, Victoria (AU)

 24.05.2020 - 16:47

Figure 96: Kerryn Sylvia, *Mixing Colours Project* (video still) 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtjZyEG5M\\_U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtjZyEG5M_U)

This experimental video was a steppingstone to letting the pieces go, in further keeping with the open qualities and unstructured ambiguous attributes of liminal space. In the installation *Embracing* (2022) the works hang without pretence, as things in themselves, the processes of heating actions harnessing these connections to liminal space and mothering feelings of ambivalence and emotional release. The intimacies of such entanglements are exposed and becoming together, holding, enfolding, and embracing as they are suspended betwixt and between, symbolically floating, fragile, and coalescing with one another. In *Foresting the Uncertain Middle* (2022) the transformed fabrics become part of the flow of things, unabashedly teetering precariously between tensions of care and chaos with their situated actions unconstrained by notions of finality in form and open to what Lamb explains as “things evolving and changing as the work progresses.”<sup>454</sup> Despite the most recent installation of the work, it still feels unfinished, suspended and partially formed in an unstable state of continual enfolding possibilities and configurations.

*Embracing* (2022) hangs like a reminder of the necessity for embracing and making space for the emergence of incidences of liminal antistructure and plays with notions of metaphoric adolescent psychic cuts to the social fabric which philosopher Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* (2007) writes of an essential counterbalance to the pressure of societal rules and norms, requiring a forced co-existence of tensions between structure and anti-structure which is paradoxically also complimentary. As Taylor explains coded society needs time to “let off steam...that the code relentlessly applied would drain us of all energy”<sup>455</sup> and periods of anti-structure provide such a temporary outlet of free reign from structures of dominant sources of power requiring a sense of play between these two registers of society. He believes a consequence of the rise of secularity in all its senses is brought about by “the eclipse of anti-structure in modernity”<sup>456</sup> and that without encounters of such conditions in liminal antistructure there is a risk of becoming a society that makes no space for the principle that contradicts it and has no limit to the enforcement of its own societal code.

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<sup>454</sup> Lamb, *Poetic Cloth: Creating Meaning in Textile Art*, p.66.

<sup>455</sup> Charles, *A Secular Age*, p.49.

<sup>456</sup> Charles, *A Secular Age*, p.51.

## Adolescence - anti-structure - anti-fabric

Art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson in *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (2017) writes of fibre-based materials in terms of their “ability to hold history and to figure contemporaneity,”<sup>457</sup> where metaphoric and poetic folds and textures of cloth play with resonances and patterning relating to the fabric of society with all its many undulations, tears, knots, ruptures, and wear as significant to the emergence of life’s ongoing processes of destruction and renewal. She strives to understand how “textiles continue to ask questions about how fibres and cloth are charged with the complex task of memory keeping, even as, like fabric, memories fade, wear through with too much use, and go threadbare.”<sup>458</sup> Bryan-Wilson draws connections between conceptualism and craft through the fibre-based work of Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña. Bryan-Wilson suggesting her work extends on Rosalind Krauss influential essay ‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’<sup>459</sup> (1979) to conceptualise and include what she terms “an expanded field of textiles” inclusive of a feminine and gendered socialisation of handing down indigenous women’s forms of craft and hand skills across generations.<sup>460</sup> She argues that Vicuña’s adherence to a conceptualising of craft sets her work apart in that it places such practices on an equal footing with other contemporaneous art forms embracing its expressive, “tactile, feminine and mythic”<sup>461</sup> roots where textile materials are presented in their raw and incipient states before becoming something else.

In her essay ‘Ouvrage: Knot a Not, Notes on Knots’ (1997) curator Catherine De Zegher builds her ideas for Vicuña’s work on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s philosophical observations by connecting her use of felt through both installation and performance to a way of reframing concerns for “crossing boundaries that separate the individual and collective...the smooth and the striated,” and searching for something that can reshape and shift present dominant motivational forces and narratives of profit and power, assisting beyond such constructs in “recovering the texture of communication.”<sup>462</sup>

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<sup>457</sup> Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, p.108.

<sup>458</sup> Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, p.178.

<sup>459</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (1979), JSTOR.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/778224>.

<sup>460</sup> Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, pp.114-15.

<sup>461</sup> Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, p.141.

<sup>462</sup> Catherine de Zegher, "Ouvrage: Knot a Not, Notes on Knots " in *The Precarious: The Art and Poetry of Cecilia Vicuña* ed. Catherine de Zegher (Hanover: University Press of New England 1997), pp.28-29.



Figure 97: Cecilia Vicuña, *Quipu Womb, The Story of the Red Thread* 2017, EMST, National Museum of Contemporary Art, documenta 14, Athens, mixed media, (wool, rope, cane sticks) Approx. (6m H x 8m W) Site specific installation. Photo by Mathias Völzke, <https://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/13557/cecilia-vicuna>

Deleuze and Guattari in the book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987) ascribe to an aesthetics of smooth and striated space and the simultaneous mixture of the two in which felt becomes “an anti-fabric. It implies no separation of threads, no intertwining, only an entanglement of fibres obtained by fulling”<sup>463</sup> Close up the surfaces of the fabrics transformed through heating processes in *Foresting the Uncertain Middle* (2022) also reveal a haptic tactility of intensities and affects invoking Deleuze and Guattari’s notions of anti-fabric, where pockets of the original weave of everyday use and functionality resist the smoothing of the surface before it leaves the manufactured and structured matrix that it operates from within. The processed fabric succumbs to the improvisational forces of heating that smooth the fibres away from previous distinctions between weft and weave, becoming simultaneously both striated and smooth at the same time. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest this is a space of continuous variation and development, a space where “the in-between has taken on all the consistency”<sup>464</sup> in terms of changes in direction, entanglements, interlacing’s, and mixtures.

Deleuze and Guattari state “to think is to voyage” and as the eyes travel across the changing and uneven geographies of such anti-fabrics there are indications everywhere of these cross overs in space from smooth to striated to smooth, and the authors explain that in the presence of these varied directional passages of place and “transformations of one within the other...Voyaging smoothly is a becoming, and a difficult, uncertain becoming at that.”<sup>465</sup> Striated homogenous space, according to Deleuze and Guattari is “instituted by the State apparatus”<sup>466</sup> while smooth space arises like a patchwork “a counterattack combining the smooth and the holey”<sup>467</sup> and in transforming the fabrics I encounter an improvisational dynamic of free, creative action that is metaphorically symbolic of Turner’s formulations of subversive and temporal liminal phases of antistructure.

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<sup>463</sup> Gilles. Guattari Deleuze, Félix., *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, ed. Massumi Brian (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p.475.

<sup>464</sup> Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.380.

<sup>465</sup> Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.482.

<sup>466</sup> Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.474.

<sup>467</sup> Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.481.



Figure 98: Kerry Sylvia, *Embracing* (close-up detail) 2022, heat treated anti-fabric, dimensions variable

Within industrialised societies Turner believes this works at “subtly putting down the central values of the basic, work-sphere society, or at least of selected sectors of that society,” and proposes the generation of meaning in culture emerges from such “interfaces between established cultural sub-systems.”<sup>468</sup> These are the liminal interstices of anti-structure out of which grow “the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses, enacting a multiplicity of social roles.”<sup>469</sup> For Turner liminal anti-structure is not a rejection or reversal of structural necessities, but rather opens up a rarity of space. It allows a break from orderly patterns of consistency and containment, creating necessary contrasts and alternatives that bloom or expand like uncertain and uncontrollable holes of differentiation and eruption within the fabric of society, and the surface of the anti-fabric becomes a potent symbolic expression of this middle in between space of holey ruptures and potentialities.

Despite adolescent culture becoming a highly commercialised and commodified part of current Western social structures, it still seems to create the emergence of some generationally loosened resistance, writhing against the very structures that seek to cajole and force it back into line, perhaps as a fundamental necessity to engage and test forms of anarchistic behaviour, or as something more therapeutic; to detach from social structure, to let off steam, loosen the valve and experience the value in letting go, however small the window into the potentiality of such instants of liberation and release may be. A common thread of psychological thinking grows around the idea that what we learn in childhood we must carry with us to the end of our lives, but it does not stay the same. Instead, as Plotkin (2008) explains through his theorising on adolescence “while culture was a given in childhood, now it becomes a fabric for us to refashion,”<sup>470</sup> and part of our search for some authentic social presence. We attempt to reconcile the shifting nature of such understandings through the uniqueness of each of our centres of gravity and worldview and Plotkin writes of it as something sensed in young people that is “essential to human development...in their blood, the need for a passage, not directly into ‘adulthood,’ but into another and as yet unknown world.”<sup>471</sup>

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<sup>468</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.41.

<sup>469</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.44.

<sup>470</sup> Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul*, p.167.

<sup>471</sup> Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul*, pp.238-39.

For Plotkin the conscious discovery and cultivation of every human being is a unique and mystic relationship to the wild world which is currently overlooked, suppressed, or expelled from Western society with traces of mystic roots “including those from which our own societies have emerged,”<sup>472</sup> buried and fractured from our affinity with the natural world. Plotkin’s alternative eco-psychological model of transpersonal experience and cultural transformation is one of stages rather than ages where the problem in the contemporary world lies with the way we conceive and embody adulthood as an advanced version of adolescence. He maintains adolescence is not a “a pause on the threshold of the adult world,” but rather a time of social adventure, unshielded from the immediate family, a time of openness towards “a new set of attractions, opportunities, and problems to solve” as we struggle with the ongoing work of fashioning an authentic, genuine, and socially acceptable persona.<sup>473</sup>

## Wild wandering

A soulcentric society understands that culture must be continually renewed; it welcomes seeds of organic, wild innovation. **Bill Plotkin**<sup>474</sup>

Plotkin believes “our modern loss of effective rites of passage,” is alienating us from a relationship with the natural world and suggests society stigmatises rites of passage and soul work as some new-age spiritual fantasy, peddling instead a story that perpetuates arrested personal growth in service of an endless industrial growth society “unable to imagine a life beyond consumerism and soul suppressing jobs.”<sup>475</sup> For Plotkin growing whole in today’s terms requires a third dimension of insight into human evolution as a collectively evolving adventure, dancing and shifting in ever new ways, not only as an unfolding and replicating pattern at the heart of First Nations knowledge systems, but also, as a “one-way, progressive, nonrepeating trajectory of evolution and transformation,”<sup>476</sup> actively embracing of both traditional and Western people’s “mystical relationship to the wild world.”<sup>477</sup> Stepping back

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<sup>472</sup> Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul*, p.3.

<sup>473</sup> Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul*, p.174.

<sup>474</sup> Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul*, p.375.

<sup>475</sup> Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul*, p.6.

<sup>476</sup> Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul*, p.15.

<sup>477</sup> Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul*, p.3.

from such extreme closeups the anti-fabric surfaces reveal a section of patterning that is still just recognisable as a motif of free-flowing wild horses on the horizon, a metaphorical figuration and connection to Plotkin's notions of rewilding and of the inner innate wilderness terrains and dimensions of vitality explored during adolescence. Plotkin claims freedom for young people in today's Western societies is only briefly tolerated making it a rarity "that they are encouraged to uncover, celebrate, and claim"<sup>478</sup> the hidden and mysterious value of attending to and seeking their own full wildness and being supported in this journey.



Figure 99: *Heating Fabric Process in the Studio* (close-up detail) - preloved doona cover with wild horse motif, image by Kerryn Sylvia

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<sup>478</sup> Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul*, p.253.

As a metaphorical forest the installation is charged with gathering glimpses of the shapes and symbols of such wanderings, of honouring the wildness of journeying into the depths of the unknown and its shadows. A reminder that, as Plotkin explains, any village of structural systems exists only as “a tiny spot of light in a vast field of fruitful darkness,” and requires an unavoidable period of fallow time spent in preparation for saying goodbye and shedding the old, leaving the home of your former identity, and making way for exploration into the mysteries of the new.<sup>479</sup>

For Plotkin “wild wandering can serve as the hub from which all other soulcraft practices radiate — for example, the art of solitude, of self-reliance, of befriending the dark, or of shadow work,”<sup>480</sup> and I think of my own nocturnal adolescent rite of passage memory at play as a fulcrum and force around ideas of the primacy of such passages in connecting with places and experiences of awe and wonder as we did in childhood, which although we cannot experience all of the time, we still need reminding of. This experience has no doubt unconsciously impacted upon the overall atmosphere and subjunctive mood of the installation of *Foresting the Uncertain Middle* (2022) and on the processes arising in the making of the works that hover and scatter throughout the space like gifts, talismans, and elemental tidings, mediated both through the experiences of the children, but also brought back from this dark, shadowy resonance of my own wild wandering.

## **Shadows and the social fabric**

*The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (2010) makes links between heating processes transformative alchemical forces of fire with its transmutable symbolism emanating from such intensities as “the stuff of the self, worked by the libidinal fires of urges, instincts, affects and desires.”<sup>481</sup> A patterning of irregular and partially formed tears and holes become a kind of creation out of destruction, an aggressive attack on the surface through a rupturing textile process that introduces a sense of strangeness into the familiarity of the fabric. The plastic fragility of haphazard shaping across the transformed surfaces allows in light, gifting space to shadows so they may push through and present themselves as evidence of the

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<sup>479</sup> Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul*, p.254.

<sup>480</sup> Plotkin, *Nature and the Human Soul*, pp.279-80.

<sup>481</sup> Ronnberg, *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images*, p.84.

crucially symbolic part heat and fire play as invisible animating substances of life with its full spectrum of “multiple flickers and excitations of psychic life.”<sup>482</sup>



Figure 100: Kerryn Sylvia, *A Delicate Enfolding of Blood and Heart* (with shadow detail) 2022, heat treated anti-fabric, knots, resin, Mildura Arts Centre

Poet Robert Bly in *A Little Book on the Human Shadow* (1988) writes of the unconscious function shadows play in our lives as hidden source material we must access and work with, consuming them and their negative emotions with care and attention. In attending to “the matter of honouring the shadow material,”<sup>483</sup> we encounter an intuitive darkness which is a

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<sup>482</sup> Ronnberg, *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images*, p.82.

<sup>483</sup> Robert Bly, *A Little Book on the Human Shadow* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988), p.57.

dynamic resource in times of crisis and life struggles, part of our misunderstood and misguided behaviours that we must try to embrace and integrate back into both our personal and collective stories. Bly suggests there is a metaphorical rattling that intuitively alerts our senses to the shadow when “something doesn’t quite fit any more,”<sup>484</sup> and we are called to the work of valuing this aspect of psyche with care, attention, and support.

The transformed fabrics of everyday familial use that gather and coalesce in *Foresting the Uncertain Middle* (2022) call into play this practice of honouring, with the perforated surfaces activated through projections of cast shadows, filling the space with an aliveness of co-mingling relationships between tensions of light and darkness. The geographies of these surfaces with their potential shadow energies remain porous, open, and symbolic of the dynamics in developing personalities and identities. They push into the in-between resonances of threshold concepts associated “with the awakening of the senses,” and the possibility of connecting to an ancestral awareness of being alive to the world with all its shadows, smells, sounds, shimmers, and sacredness, qualities that Bly believes we risk becoming numbed too without adequate access.<sup>485</sup> Working on our personal shadows requires a certain kind of temporality and repetition whereby “eating our shadow is a very slow process. It doesn’t happen once, but hundreds of times.”<sup>486</sup> This absorption process, metaphorically implied by Bly, comes only after we have allowed our shadows and their potential negative emotions to surface, creating a process whereby “giving and reabsorbing projected substances is similar for all the qualities we have scattered out into the world,”<sup>487</sup> and remains integral to the development of more harmonious conceptions personhood.

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<sup>484</sup> Bly, *A Little Book on the Human Shadow*, p.31.

<sup>485</sup> Bly, *A Little Book on the Human Shadow*, p.66.

<sup>486</sup> Bly, *A Little Book on the Human Shadow*, p.38.

<sup>487</sup> Bly, *A Little Book on the Human Shadow*, p.30.

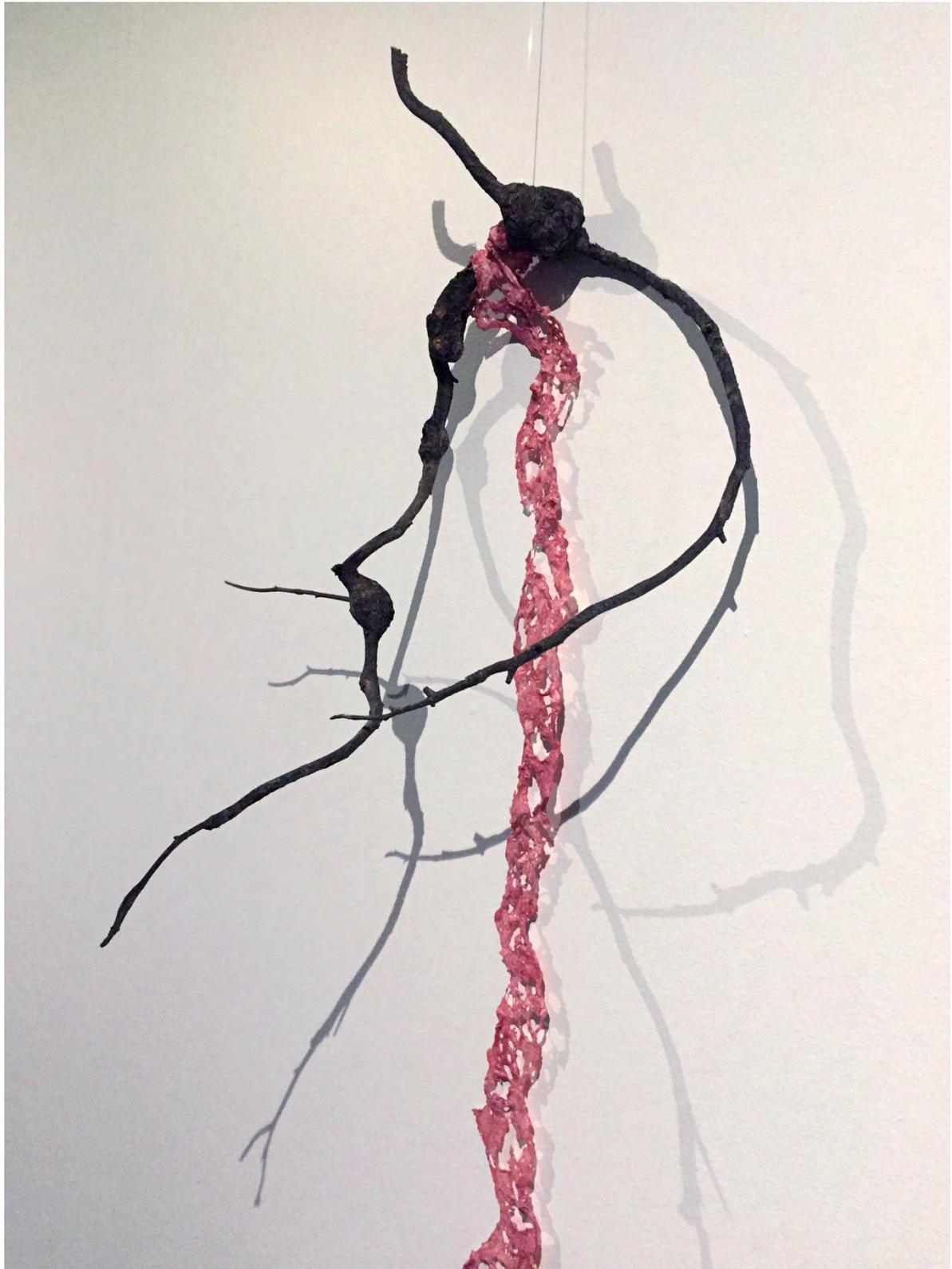


Figure 101: Kerry Sylvia, *A Sideways Glimpse of Something* (shadow detail) 2022, heat treated anti-fabric, wood, knots, metal, From Liminal Exhibition Mildura Arts Centre

## Perpetually dancing through

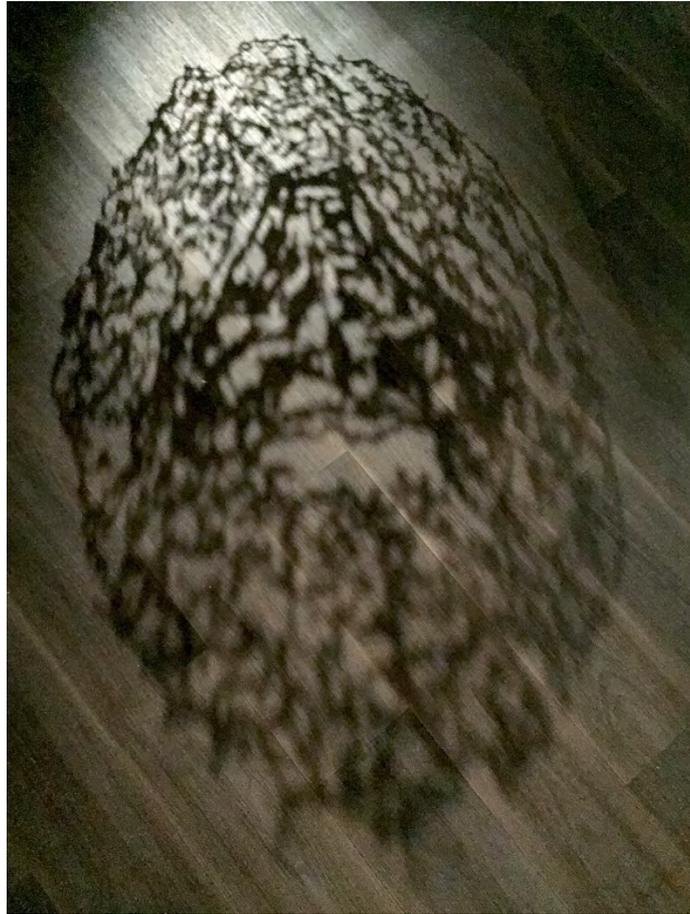


Figure 102: Kerryn Sylvia, *Dancing with Shadows and Shields # I* (projected shadow detail) 2022, From the installation *Foresting the Uncertain Middle* 2022, Mildura Arts Centre

Catching the light and projecting shadows of poignant beauty are the three works suspended in the space in *Dancing with Shadows and Shields #I, II, and III* (2022). The once protective childhood things of passion, habit and practice are excavated from my daughter's box of dancing costumes, the fabrics now perforated and precariously holding on, symbolic of the ambiguous nature of the liminal phases of adolescent life with its unrelenting calling towards transition and the new. Despite their transformational fragility the objects remain shieldlike, continuing to sway, suspended, and twirling, moving continuously to their own dynamic rhythms with cast shadows following along and sharing in their multidirectional dance. They encapsulate something of that beautiful analogy of the dance of life, functioning in their new indeterminant states as ritualised things and revealing of their newfound antistructure as anti-fabric. Rendered unfamiliar these delicate, and porous metaphorical symbols of my daughter's

adolescent rite of passage journey are reflective of a gentler transition than that of my son's peer orientated teenage angst of crashing cars and dabbling in mind altering substances. That is not to say she did not also experience her own adolescent struggles, urges, and actions of rebelliousness, but just that the sense of her search for identity and meaning during this liminal phase seemed to drift more rhythmically and holds some atmospheric essence of familiarity with memories from my own experiential adolescent rite of passage story. The softening of experience that informs these artworks also has to do with the timing of adolescence for my daughter who as I commenced this practice-led research was preparing to leave her hometown after a gap year, creating a sense of her as already stepping out of this phase of her life and becoming something new. This made it feel like a less risky business to explore than working with experiences enmeshed in currents of the unfolding emotionally heightened and present stuff of life which has been the case throughout this research for my son's passage crisis.



Figure 103: Kerryn Sylvia, *Dancing with Shadows and Shields # I, II, & III* 2022, heat treated anti-fabric

My daughter's dance is also my own as I improvise with the fabrics, the co-mingling of an essence between stories also caught up in some entanglement and mutuality of experiences across time. Improvisational connotations of mothering as action and practice develop out of this relational interplay of experiences and mothering also slips into midlife-mothering as an attention of focus plays with moments, actions, and objects that become part of the mythology of our shared experiences. In terms of the institution of motherhood, I have never identified with the role as an entire way of being and around which to build myself. Instead, it has always

felt more like a constructed part played within an evolving identity. There has been this sense of the children as transient to my life, impossible to hold onto and an act of futility in trying, despite the growth of a conflicting desire that arises unbidden at times to do just that. This has been a surprising and more intense development than expected. Engaging with it has meant exploring not only the deep anguish around feelings of my children's sense of loss as they move through experiential passages and processes of breakdown, destruction, and repair, but also draws my attention towards a sense of grief for and loss in something of us.

These are little metaphorical deaths, necessary deaths in the processes of change that involve going into the unknown and setting aside the familiar. Experiences of liminality hold their own knowledges found at the limit of words that push beyond more dualist, rationalist, enlightenment derived understandings of what constitutes knowing. Victor Turner explains that he “prefers to regard transition as a process, a becoming, and in the case of *rites de passage* even a transition”<sup>488</sup> where the potential to touch these knowledges comes not from some universal right or true meaning, but from living, experiencing, and intuiting without clear or direct signifying links, the cultural properties belonging to liminality. I speculate that themes around life and death impulses play a crucial role in imparting some wisdom around how to live life well, in coping with risk, building resilience, and gradually coming to terms with a sense of our own mortality. The role of such metaphorical expressions of living and dying experienced within liminal passages such as life crisis rites also invite us towards glimpses of a sense of what Donna Haraway in the book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) explains as understanding the self as part of the ongoing thickness of time and building capacity for giving our exquisite attention to processes in the world and to “face the dead and the living in all of their materialities.”<sup>489</sup> For Haraway becoming engaged in each other's lives means “needing each other in diverse, passionate, corporeal, meaningful ways,”<sup>490</sup> and we are called to go with them enfolded practices of care, empathy, and compassion, into these relational stories.

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<sup>488</sup> Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, p.94.

<sup>489</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), p.69.

<sup>490</sup> Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, p.72.

## Mothering mutuality

In the context of mothering my responsibility becomes one of attentiveness and bearing witnessing with love and compassion, marking, and honouring these passages through processes of making that concurrently settle and allow affective traces of a co-mingling of inner worlds of experiences to surface. It's a humbling way of knowing and a constant change of state is required so that more knots of knowledge, ruptures and shapes can emerge, symbolic of the destruction and rebirth of not only adolescent crisis passages but also of a register of maternal recognition that must be redefined, becoming a new phase in midlife mothering. Replacing previous mothering concerns of leaving the infant, here it is the adolescent children that are growing up, leaving home, and it is their departure, the sounds of quiet in the house, the rhythm of home fractured, mealtimes haphazard, routine relaxed, that bring with it a slight anxiety of impending aloneness and requires attention to the re-invention of these relationships.

Psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin's book *Beyond Doer and Done To – Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third*, (2018) proposes a concept and shift towards "an intersubjective concept of the Third,"<sup>491</sup> grounding her ideas in a psychoanalytic process that she views as a departure from more Freudian and Lacanian theories and conceptions of Thirdness. She argues against patriarchal forms of personality formation believing instead in characteristics of the feminine and maternal necessary for addressing the moral crisis of today through a more rhythmic and energetic "potential space of thirdness,"<sup>492</sup> and I imagine this intersubjective Thirdness as a condition of in-between space tied to qualities of liminal antistructure. In seeking to question notions of self, outside of those formed through structural systems supportive of unconstrained individualism and generalising binary concepts, antistructure becomes a process for creating conditions of thirdness within social constructions of community, bringing us closer to Benjamin's sense of building systems of experiential interrelatedness connected to "anything that one holds in mind that creates another point of reference outside the dyad."<sup>493</sup>

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<sup>491</sup> Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third*, p.32.

<sup>492</sup> Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third*, p.24.

<sup>493</sup> Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third*, p.23.



Figure 104: Kerryn Sylvia, *That Mutuality of Something Between Us* (detail) 2022, Wood, string, mud, knots, nylon, heat treated anti-fabric, film still from exhibition tour, Mildura Arts Centre, image courtesy of Robert Klarich <https://www.milduraartscentre.com.au/WhatsOnPages/Digital/Liminal-Exhibition-Tour.aspx>

While Benjamin draws her ideas from pre-symbolic, non-verbal and gestural experiences of early mother and child interactions, it is my experience that resonances of these transpersonal and metaphorical qualities of affective attunement and mutuality also persist well beyond this phase, extending into the challenges and struggles of adolescent liminality and crisis where, as Benjamin suggests, holding in mind the knowledge that “distress is natural and ephemeral”<sup>494</sup> is just as important and difficult to do as it was in infancy. Within this adolescent drama there is still very much a mothering balance to be struck, between habitual responses of guilt and helplessness that threaten to overwhelm, and acceptance of the others nature arising. It feels as if mothering sometimes operates on a similar level to that of the psychoanalyst and there is an empathic sense of being caretaker or *shamum* to the quality of this “certain kind of internal mental space,”<sup>495</sup> requiring an openness to things and a maintenance of trust in events and encounters. At its best the intersubjective relatedness of such experiences allows for surrender and transformation generating what Benjamin explains as “the internal parental Third, which takes the form of reflections on what will create

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<sup>494</sup> Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third*, p.36.

<sup>495</sup> Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third*, p.23.

connection in this relationship,<sup>496</sup> as we strive to stay attentively with the trouble and work in symbiosis with difference.

## **Glimpses of partial bodies**

Throughout the making of the work for *Liminal* (2022), the quality for this stage of a rite of passage expressed through the exhibition title becomes a way of playing with the intersubjective relations between mothering and adolescence and for experiencing something of Benjamin's "transformational learning of thirdness"<sup>497</sup> which is reflected on, imagined, reinvented, and worked through a sense of mutuality; a metaphorical tying each other together in knots, moulding, shaping, and emerging out of a shared experience of patterning. For Benjamin the Third is a felt sense and intersubjective form of relating where "being in this place together includes each person's respective worlds as well as the symbolic and affective links between them,"<sup>498</sup> which are tolerated through processes and patterns oscillating between tensions of disorder and restoration. Remaining attentive to the paradox of recognition in the shifting psychic balance and spiritual milieu of others means striving to stay open and catching something of the points of rupture and crisis that develop along the way, that in turn become sites of possibility and potential for meaning making.

Catching these experiential moments seems like an apt way to describe their appearance within the work providing some insight into the way the process begins. Sometimes the catching is conscious, given by things or materials and their mnemonic nuances and at other times it is more like a sensorium of feelings and emotions, something more unconscious and primal that drives me along in the moment, catching what I can before the moment passes and the gesture or some perceived glimpse of it is lost. Reclamation of a potential reconnection with a deeper sense of our existential preconditions of interrelatedness are happening throughout *Liminal* (2022), referring to such palpable pre-symbolic maternal bonds and their embodied and material root conditions carried along throughout life in lived relation to others which current complexities of societal structures often leave little contemplative room for. The place of liminal antistructure is not precisely a location at all but a quality, state, or condition embracing of light, shadows, and a fractured incompleteness of internal and external body parts indictive

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<sup>496</sup> Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third*, p.37.

<sup>497</sup> Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third*, p.37.

<sup>498</sup> Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third*, p.75.

of pre-symbolic associations and interrelationships. Glimpses of these evanescent bodily resonances support an emergent concept of bodily associations developed not through conscious intention, but rather through an intensity and intimacy of transpersonal engagement in the other. Curator Stuart Morgan writes of the *Rites of Passage: Art at the End of the Century* group exhibition as a sequence of spectacles where “light gives way to dark...the body is often presented as incomplete: scarred or fighting for survival,” and where the work of artists represented share in an aesthetic instability existing on the verge and reflective of a human tendency towards building myths and images of ourselves that do not correspond with facts but are not lies either, “they are simply stories we tell.”<sup>499</sup> One such story can be told through the work *That Mutuality of Something Between Us* (2022), where a rounded clay ball hangs precariously inside of a sheer fabric sheath, cradled and encircled again by another protective enveloping of anti-fabric that is also suspended in gentle motion. In looking at the artwork that has taken shape, memories of a childhood testicular hernia force their way to the surface, the trauma of the event lived through together now softened in my mothering memory both by time and this poetic form of the sculptural musing.

Other works that call forth bodily associations are found in *Teardrops of Mind: Pink, Yellow, Blue* (2022), a triad of sculptural forms hanging between floor and ceiling resemble brains and play with notions of conscious and unconscious inner workings of the mind with its vastness of inner experiences. Blocked and muted pastel colours across the repetition of forms symbolise a kind of distancing and fading over time from their foundational primacy, although either colour scheme in today’s societal terms remains bombarded by a heavily commercialised industry of all things baby and child. The organic shapes hover heavily betwixt and between, their containers stretched in tension towards the floor like tear drops suspended in motion, perhaps seeking some form of grounding, or perhaps just revealing in the preciousness and pathos of time spent in the middle place of things and holding potential on the precipice of the new. The organic forms cast from clusters of tree knots once living in symbiosis with the host trees they had attached themselves to act as metaphors for this kind of intrinsic connection and interrelationship between individual entities.

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<sup>499</sup> Morgan, "Introduction," pp.13-14.



Figure 105: Kerry Sylvia, *Teardrops of Mind: Pink, Yellow, Blue* 2022, plaster, resin, paint, metal stand, Mildura Arts Centre

Nixon observes through the work of Bourgeois an emotional ambivalence that confronts an insistent maternal and mothering narrative thread that erupts from the shadows and continues to build and persist throughout adult life.<sup>500</sup> In understanding her sculptural work Nixon makes links to a “neglected history that Kleinian theory makes it possible to summon – the history of child analysis and its interplay with feminism, the invention of the women artist, and the emergence of art objects as part-objects.”<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>500</sup> Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and the Story of Modern Art*, p.9.

<sup>501</sup> Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and the Story of Modern Art*, p.269.



Figure 106: Kerry Sylvia, *Knots of Heartwood and Backbone* 2021, plaster, string, knots

The infantile conditions evident in Bourgeois's art also resonate within narrative threads of my own practice and are glimpsed within entanglements extending into recesses between adolescence and mothering with the part-object also surviving. These part-objects of the infantile experience seem to arise unconsciously and unbidden, surfacing out of and only after the rituals of meditatively and repetitiously making cease. The first impulse and necessity to action outweighs any need for reasoning behind the gesture. It pushes the rational to the back of consciousness so that space feels open to the unknown, where actions go along with the material, steering their way into the messiness of diffractive experiences and intra-actions. Nixon suggests the art of Bourgeois is "in pursuit of the subject on the threshold of existence,"<sup>502</sup> which I interpret not only in terms of its relevance to pre-symbolic forms of infancy, but also inclusive of seeds of meaning derived at through ongoing instances of

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<sup>502</sup> Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and the Story of Modern Art*, p.10.

perceived little births, deaths, and rebirths encountered across a lifespan. Even if not consciously orchestrated, throughout processes of making the part-object breaks through with bodily forms and innards surfacing and revealing themselves through hindsight. These unpremeditated forms appear like innards as brains, spines, ribcages, beating hearts, wombs, eggs, and embryos, but are also reflective of more outer bodily forms like legs, heads, listening ears, breasts, and Linea nigra lines. Further to this they are also suggestive of a constellating of shared experiences around psychological states of being and becoming connected to archetypal symbols of cosmos, spirals, ripples, halos, knots, and shadows, in attempting to illuminate the awe inspiring and ineffable qualities of spiritual and sacred realms. For Nixon “the part-object survives...marks a theoretical position that has remained in play across modernism and postmodernism...from a subsymbolic or presymbolic position,”<sup>503</sup> with the logic of such bodily presences and assemblages persisting within feminist art practices in reopening, rethinking, recasting, and marking experiences of social and psychic experience.



Figure 107: Kerry Sylvia, *A Gathering of Elements and Inarticulate Frames in the Listening Ears of Mutable Passage* 2022, from the installation *Foresting the Uncertain Middle*, air dried clay, ash, burnt wood, mica, plaster, peppercorns, salt, plaster, resin, vinyl, limestone (aka Karadoc diamonds), wood, glass, wire, tissue paper, mud, photo by Lisa Guzzardi

<sup>503</sup> Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and the Story of Modern Art*, p.249.

## Bodies, movement, identity

My work is life, it is life's movement. Since the beginning, I looked for movement and possibilities, but also memory. We can't live without those things. **Sonia Gomes**<sup>504</sup>

Afro-Brazilian artist Sonia Gomes creates biomorphic sculptural assemblages that transform found or gifted natural and humble materials such as driftwood, clothing, fabrics, and threads. Curatorial director Michaëla Mohrmann in a conversation with Sonia Gomes at *PACE Gallery* (2020) speaks of her work as “an abstract language that is marked by ambiguity and fluidity... evocative of the body, of the vitality and movement of living beings, even non-human ones” with a repeated gesture in the stitching, wrapping and folding, and a sense of what Gomes expresses as a thing unfolding through a “preoccupation with movement.”<sup>505</sup> In his essay ‘Weaving the morning’ (2017) curator Ricardo Sardenberg alludes to this poetic unfolding expressing the action of tying as “an amorous entanglement, a powerful bond of affection” that culminates in processes of making reflective of “a kind of lived experience of the things inside her home studio”.<sup>506</sup> There is a rawness to the work that makes it feel as if it’s still on the way to somewhere, as if we are glimpsing something in transition and unfinished which I find relatable to notions of the liminal possibilities of antistructure and becoming, reflective of the intimate matter of “being in the world”<sup>507</sup> which Sardenberg believes is experienced through the work of Gomes.

Curator Solange Farkas in her essay ‘Sewn Worlds’ (2017) refers to Gomes’s work as “somehow related to the affirmation of memory, identity and the transformative power of creation in situations of vulnerability and invisibility”.<sup>508</sup> This transformative possibility of power resides within all groups that feel themselves to be outside of structured societal systems and norms. There is a sense of the fragility and instability which seems to reside in the

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<sup>504</sup> "Broadcasts: Sonia Gomes's Life Doesn't Frighten Me," Blum & Poe, 2020, accessed January 14th, 2020, [https://www.blumandpoe.com/broadcasts/sonia\\_gomes](https://www.blumandpoe.com/broadcasts/sonia_gomes).

<sup>505</sup> Marina Perez Simão Sonia Gomes, "A Conversation with Sonia Gomes and Marina Perez Simão," interview by Michaëla Mohrmann, Sep 3, 2020, <https://www.pacegallery.com/journal/a-conversation-with-sonia-gomes-and-marina-perez-sim%C3%A3o/>.

<sup>506</sup> Ricardo Sardenberg, "Weaving the Morning," in *Sonia Gomes* (Brazil: Cobogo, 2017), p.114.

<sup>507</sup> Sardenberg, "Weaving the Morning," p.112.

<sup>508</sup> Solange Farkas, "Sewn Worlds," in *Sonia Gomes* (Rio de Janeiro: Cobogo, 2017), p.133.

treatment of materials and techniques in the hands of Gomes. Her restructured forms are both organic and bodily, reminiscent of encounters between what Mohrmann explains as “a fluidity between inside and outside”<sup>509</sup> giving them an otherworldly quality. This is experienced through works such as *Untitled* (2005) which is reminiscent of a framed torso that reveals the innards of the form and allows your eyes to push right through to the space within. The object is sensed as something writhing or contorting, like the motion of a dance caught or suspended in action. In an interview with Gomes on research platform *Artload* (2015) she states “sometimes I think my work might look like my insides because it’s extremely visceral”<sup>510</sup> which is a quality she claims as an unintentional condition in her style of making.



Figure 108: Sonia Gomes, *Untitled* 2005, stitching, bindings, different fabrics, and laces on wire 13" × 55-1/8" × 26-3/4" (33 cm × 140 cm × 67.9 cm), <https://www.pacegallery.com/artfairs/frieze-london-10/>

The sculpture acts like a line drawing in space, twisting and combining both physicality and movement. There is something about the nature of experience in the work, both making it for Gomes and in the way we experience it as a viewer. According to Sardenberg it is the daily toil, the invisible transference of her manual labour and gesture of making we experience as an affective intimacy through the work of Gomes. That the sculpture is part of her is felt through the repetition of stitching, twisting, wrapping, and binding, the actions and bodily

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<sup>509</sup> Sonia Gomes, interview.

<sup>510</sup> "Sonia Gomes/Artist," *Artload*, 2015, accessed 8th October, 2020, <https://artload.com/video/sonia-gomes>.

resonances in the artists techniques and movements evidence of her time spent engaged in the performance of making.<sup>511</sup>

The mnemonic dimension to Gomes practice is a point of difference from my own work. For myself I already have a long, intimate attachment and history with the objects stored and collected as gifts and mementos of my children's experiences which a mother often keeps as evidence of the entanglements of love and growth. These shared experiences I believe to be embedded in the unassuming objects of our everyday lives. The sense of our entanglements, both experiential and accumulated across the passage of time, are impregnated into these fabrics, materials, and surfaces through the passage of our own domestic family experiences and history. For Gomes, however, the gifted clothing and materials hold stories and experiences that she honours and respects even though they remain unknown to her, and she explains that she often sits with the materials for very long periods of time in reverence and responsibility to their previous histories before commencing a sculpture, feeling as if the materials find her, rather than her searching for or collecting them.<sup>512</sup>

Hers is a preference for the details from the stories of those forgotten and abandoned materials to remain hidden within the works. Sardenberg refers to these as the secret histories "donated by owners who possessed intimate emotional connections with those objects and hoped that the artist might help them to find new meanings in them".<sup>513</sup> In working the materials Gomes layers her own action of lived experience over top of the personal, imbuing and entangling them with her own stories, which can be seen to remain through encounters with installations such as *Maria dos Anjos* (2017-18) that Gomes tells us was transformed and "made of a wedding dress".<sup>514</sup>

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<sup>511</sup> Sardenberg, "Weaving the Morning," p.113-15.

<sup>512</sup> Sonia Gomes, interview.

<sup>513</sup> Sardenberg, "Weaving the Morning," p.111.

<sup>514</sup> Sonia Gomes, interview.



Figure 109: Sonia Gomes, *Maria dos Anjos* (installation view) 2017-2018 © Sonia Gomes. Courtesy: Mendes Wood DM São Paulo (Brussels, New York) and Thomas Dane Gallery (London, Naples). Photo by Bruno Leão, <https://magazine.artland.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/xxxxT0A0524-hr-copy.jpg>

The arrival of such materials brings with it the fragment of something, a glimpse of a story or moment in the history of experience that Gomes works with without worrying about the completeness of the work preferring instead to stay open to the process of creation and liberated from political concerns in that moment of making, although she does concede perspectives of marginalisation and articulation of untold stories evolve unintentionally in the outcome of her installations. For Gomes the work forms as an unfolding rather than a ritualised act although either approach suggests a connection to the intuitive bodily actions and physicality of making that resonates throughout her sculptural abstractions. Gomes explains “I never think of a title ahead of time. I let the work find that title.”<sup>515</sup> She is content for each work to carry an unfinished resonance where even the process of naming each sculpture remains open to the passage of possibilities.

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<sup>515</sup> Sonia Gomes, interview.

Largely self-taught, Gomes returned to art school in her forties as a way of affirming her practice as art rather than textiles or craft, and her work straddles a boundary between textiles and sculpture, disrupting the notion of her art as feminine work and pulsating with the force of a soft politics that she feels belongs to many marginalised groups of our contemporary societies.<sup>516</sup> Her sculptures hang in a threshold between art and handcrafting explained by Farkas as something “reinvented within a contemporary context” and evocative of her mixed-race origins and influences that come from growing up with the folk rituals of her African maternal grandmother, and time spent in her European father’s house.<sup>517</sup>



Figure 110: Sonia Gomes, *When the Sun Rises in Blue* (installation view) 2021, Bum & Poe Los Angeles, photo by Josh Schaedel [https://www.blumandpoe.com/exhibitions/sonia\\_gomes](https://www.blumandpoe.com/exhibitions/sonia_gomes)

Further to this Sardenberg tells us that it is through her heritage and poetic encounters with materials that “the artist condenses her own experiences and the experience of things”<sup>518</sup> exploring the processes of movement, vitality and ritual making that are held within the sculptures. As she works with and repurposes the humble materials her organic sculptures take

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<sup>516</sup> Artload, "Sonia Gomes/Artist."

<sup>517</sup> Farkas, "Sewn Worlds," pp.135-36.

<sup>518</sup> Sardenberg, "Weaving the Morning," p.116.

on new life with the installation of work for *When the Sun Rises in Blue* (2021) hanging like reminders of something hidden within, like internal organs, entrails or intestines unfurled and contorted, paradoxically both hideous and beautiful all at the same time. They cross some threshold between outside and inside, between structure and anti-structure as they trail down, suspended in a liminal quality of tensions and betweenness, where you can almost sense the gentle movements the knot-like clusters of objects would make in space.

*Foresting the Uncertain Middle* (2022) is a culmination of material transformations and processes combined from the various modes of practice throughout the research, with the final works installed as a metaphorical and emergent bloom space of growth and transformational potential towards honouring and making offerings for liminal experiences of my adolescent children. It is an intersubjective space entangled with my memories of teenage liminal passage that creates an atmosphere of sound, shadows, and light, opening towards possibilities arising out experiences in mothering the ambiguous nature of encounters derived from spatiality's of betweenness. It is also a space that has afforded me precious time to play and pay exquisite attention to these passages, exploring their patterns, rhythms, and emotionally embodied forms of knowledge, and attuning to their significance and potential for making meaning in my adolescent children's lives.

## **Conclusion: Renewing the liminal**

In this thesis I have researched liminal spaces as they relate to rites of passage, seeking evidence of their substance to contemporary societies and exploring how they might continue to operate and bloom as spaces of significance within societal structures of the present. This research project has explored another way to consider these passages in terms of the onslaught and relentless pace of social and cultural change spurred on by the current information age. It was a space of investigation that interested me from raising my children, watching them navigate through a world of ubiquitous information gathering, with its multiple sources and modes of stimulation and distractions. This was not a childhood experience of my own and caused me to speculate on the impacts of this on allowing time in our lives to develop a capacity towards making meaning and sense of things, for sticking with things on both individual and relational levels so that along the way we might come to deeper forms of understanding, knowledge, experience, and intuition. In our current climate of continual engagement, it seems more urgent than ever to foster spaces that slow us down, that explore the wisdom in intentionally making things slower, and allow room for contemplation in deeper and more meaningful ways of being instead of being continually interrupted from striving for encounters of substance with each other and the world.

The purpose of this research project is to highlight consideration into rites of passage in terms of the current onslaught and relentless pace of social and cultural change spurred on by the complexities of current societal structures. I have explored possibilities for contemporary forms of visual practise to offer ways of renewing and reclaiming liminal experiences and events that might otherwise be swallowed up and constricted in the maintenance of current power structures. I have come to view these passages as resistant interstices to the fixity of societal suffocation, engaging us instead in the unsettling and at times chaotic, but concurrently creatively beautiful struggles that push us to transform.

*Liminal 2022* is an exhibition that attends to the potential within these betwixt and between concepts of life passages to explore psychological notions of identity formation, intersubjectivity, and relational entanglements. The project acknowledges liminal passages as an attempt to make sense of threshold concepts that are paradoxical in nature, holding within them a potential towards both difficult experiences of struggle and disorientation but also of creativity and reliance building. These are intimately connected with questions

around cycles of life and death, on the threshold of simultaneously holding on and letting go to who we were and who we might become, calling into play ruminations around self-destruction and rebirth, growth, a ripening.

In playing with the complexities and contradictions at the heart of liminality I have taken a view that dwelling within liminal passages of anti-structure, while being disruptive to normative structures, also contain their own mellifluous flow of uniquely relational forms of knowledge production. The research posits that in tending to each other we attend to a certain kind of wisdom possessed by everyday people and the unique stories they create. In imagining an exhibition ecology symbolic of conditions and behaviours of liminal anti-structure this practice based research adds to a growth in understandings that are inter-relational, intersubjective, and embodied, acknowledging a profound potential towards the revitalization and transformation of lives, systems, and structures we create to live within. A caring and intersubjective mindset adopted throughout this project proceeds along a premise of meaning embedded within relational scenarios. It reveals that in going along with the stories and their narratives unfolding in the interstice, the potential for meaning making is formed, reformed, and transformed.

Throughout the thesis I have explored liminality as a generative source of transformational potential, and an illuminating source of relational processes and connections which has informed and assisted me in experiencing a greater sensory and emotional depth at play within family entanglements and connections. The research has revealed evidence of a liminal relational intelligibility, bound up in attention to processes that are like a constitutively relational dance. They have made evident a reciprocal nature of things at play in liminal passages which are not only important for the transformational growth of the individual but also for the renewal and reinvention of wider cultural and societal structures and their connections. Throughout my practice I have meditated on these mutually implicated interactions, embracing the intersubjective necessity and imperative discovered there. In attending to experiences we can use to explain a sense of connection in our world, processes of individuation are only one of the many relational forms that enable possibilities towards more collective experiences of transformation in which we are all responsibly implicated. In dreaming our individual functioning as constructed and implicated by otherness, the individual is conceptualised as inseparable from ongoing social processes

subtly engaged in the redirection of our energies geared towards the acquisition of resilience and new knowledge along the way.

My focus on this paradoxical liminal potential arose from my primary research questions around revising and reinventing what might constitute a contemporary rite of passage within our current contemporary milieu for my adolescent children. I asked how a visual art practice might contribute to broadening conceptions of the significant role rites play in creating space within current Western societal structures for transformation and meaning making to occur, when current research suggests the frequency of such events are declining. I also asked how an artist/mother might engage in a nuanced mutuality of attending and caring to these passages through improvised and ritualised processes of making, imbuing ordinary material/matter with certain symbolic powers of meaning to develop a greater awareness of the potential occurrence of these events within everyday experiences. The work has been concerned with capturing glimpses into conditions for the occurrence of forms of initiation, and their improvisational potential. Of learning to lean deeper into paying attention and make meditations towards these liminal spatiality's out of the mundane. In paying intimate attention what is revealed is a poetics of relationships and encounters within liminal passages, in which individual action derives its sense of meaning from its placement within in an extended relational interchange.

I began this thesis by asking the reader to go on a journey with myself and my children at an interstice between midlife mothering, adolescence, and liminality, exploring contemporary contexts for artmaking in responding, and staying with uncertain and ambivalent emotional and psychological passages of transformational potential. My mnemonically derived musings on the substance of liminal spatiality's have been expanded from within my midlife mothering role, tending to my children through their unique stories and periods of adolescent crisis, and discovering an intersubjective sense of the knowledge within these passages, exploring the strange tensions between love, care, worry, and guilt that dance there. This I reconcile as a gift to be able to fit these stories into my body, to be intersubjectively held and embodied by them, engaging in processes of making and mothering that reflect fragments and glimpses into these stories I hold in honour of others.

Processes of making the artwork have revealed a mode of creatively dealing with an ambivalence of feelings towards those we love when they start to shed, release, and outgrow

themselves. It has shown me a way of staying attentive to those passages that call us to reroute a life, to dream and dwell in liminal moments of uncertainty and struggle. In remaining emotionally and affectively attuned to the subjunctive and turbulent moods of liminality, I have developed a way to honour the process by leaning into ritualised practices and actions of knotting, heating, and wrapping, casting, and stacking, imagining transformational changes by engaging and meditating with transitional processes of making. A poetics of intersubjective and entangled forms of knowledge is at play within liminal passages, their events, and their transitional potentials, and these are reflective of my own need to honour and make offerings towards these through processes and gestures born out of the affective resonances of attentive love.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of dwelling in liminality that has grown out of this research is that of not knowing, of sticking with the unknown and uncertainty for all involved and maintaining an improvisational openness to things throughout processes of making the work. Entanglements within this uncertainty, from a mothering perspective, go beyond merely witnessing, and become an intimately sensed form of attunement and attentive love, like that bestowed upon the infant, except that now it originates from the mother and is rejected by the expanding universe of the child. My mothering role in the interactions and experiences have culminated in the production of artistic and ritualised methods of making allowing my unconscious wishes and emotions to play out through tending to materials, while also sensing a source of mutual understanding emerging as part of the process.

Through employing cathartic (mothering) processes embedded within the making of the work I have discovered a way to journey with my children through their experiences, making poetic offerings towards them in confirming and honouring their experiences. These experiences are not always appealing and at times feel overwhelmingly chaotic, but there is a sense of extraordinary and heartfelt knowledge gained in learning how to lean into these passages of transformational uncertainty, change, and potential. The making processes have afforded me some sense of surrender to the experiences of my adolescent kids, honouring their courage to shift the narrative, collapse into vulnerability, and break open to a need for healing and nurturing along the way. Struggling to love yourself and heal is an ongoing process, and I feel my practices of making act as a demonstration of the depths of my attention and love, of a willingness to take care of the soft and tender spots of my children's

sense of grief and loss, knotting, wrapping, and tending to them gently and slowly, giving time for the mess to resolve and unravel, for the tears and ruptures to appear, so that the magic of chaotic moments we have encountered together can be exposed.

It can be uncomfortable and disorientating to attempt any redefinition of personas, unlearning old habits, and learning from the loss of practices with which we once defined ourselves and part of adolescent self-aversion lies in unpacking our previous existence, and allowing emotions to surface, to make space for healing and move through trauma, to wallow in the messiness of the thick of things. They are called towards these passages of flux and uncertainty, they must step into the struggle of them bravely, with hope, belief and a rebellious attitude that brings them closer to an openness between themselves, the world, and others. This shift in the process of shedding the old and becoming something new is unsettling, even traumatic, but it still needs to be supported and encouraged. Within terrains of liminality, we discover these tumultuous terrains of life that are non-linear and exist when learning to take care of our emotions. Within these terrains we discover space to rebel against the normative structures and their promises of safety and comfort which do not align with the realities of living life which is far more chaotic and uncertain. This requirement of intentionally choosing to change over comfort, of rewriting the story, and shedding of the former self is revealing of the paradoxes of transitions which are a myriad of emotionally complicated and disorientating psychological shifts. To embrace these shifts means being willing to ache, to abandon the safe and familiar parts of persona, to dwell in a phase of sacrifice, suffering, shifting, and stumbling. There are wisdoms to discover in letting go and heeding the call to create space for change and the inevitability of pain and loss. To engage in a play of external and internal forms of validation for persona and purpose, and to understand these processes of death not as an ending but as transformative and renewing.

There is fear to be faced in taking on a new shape, of going through a period of feeling fragile, unstable, and unsteady, and you need to give yourself permission to adopt and befriend the new you. This undoing from your old shape is bitter and delicate, revealing a rawness of exposure and openness that leaves you vulnerable. It is the origins of relationship and relational experiences that shapes us, not nature or the mind but the relationship of tensions between the two. In her poem 'Step by Step', Elle Alexandra expresses a strength and ability in being able to unfold and get lost in the unknown along the way, "shifting and

shaping into who we are in this imperfect and uncertain life,”<sup>519</sup> and revelling in the magnificent messiness of being in the thick of it. The research embraces the uncertainty around how to address heightened emotions in the thick of the moment that leaves us in limbo and calls us to explore the power to mend ourselves and each other. It is the potentiality in this process of mending that entangles with the experiences and emotions of others as we explore ways to build the tools to befriend ourselves and cultivate an ability to tolerate staying psychologically awake to the mixture of ambivalent feelings that reside within passages of liminal adolescence.

The work has cemented a belief in me that making space for and paying attention to the relational and reciprocal nature of adolescent liminal interstices holds a fundamental benefit for the transformational growth of the individual, but also for the renewal and reinvention of wider cultural and societal structures and their connections and experiences of ourselves both with and in the world. In the end, I feel this research exists as a loving bookend to liminal passages of adolescence. It both honours and makes offerings towards this period of my children’s lives, with my exploration remaining responsive to a poetic of entanglements between midlife-mothering and adolescent developmental passages, providing an “intersubjective illumination...a ‘gut’ understanding of synchronicity”<sup>520</sup> described by Victor Turner and further attributed to the later writings of his wife Edith Turner as being commensurately “in accordance with the ‘other-tending’ nature of the universe.”<sup>521</sup>

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<sup>519</sup> Alexandra, *Neon Soul: A Collection of Poetry and Prose*, p.109.

<sup>520</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play*, p.48.

<sup>521</sup> Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* p.6.

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## Catalogue of works presented for examination

1. *Car Cocoon: Love and Other Collisions #2*, 2022, tissue paper, tape, screen, wire, projection
2. *Softening Tracks* 2016–2022, film still from video with soundscape, duration: 10min 32sec, Video link <https://youtu.be/wsQjKaZuT3A>
3. *Illuminated Glimpses Between Shadow and Light* 2022, fabric, objects, lights, tape rolls, latex, tissue paper, natural materials
4. *Illuminating Shadow Objects* 2021, tissue paper, tape, painted wood, metal stand, string
5. *trans-form* 2022, 84 pages, 23 x 15 cm, softcover, 2022, self-published photobook
6. *tuska teens* 2022, 52 pages, 26 x 21 cm, hardcover, self-published photobook
7. *Tuska Boy and the Salt of the Earth* 2022, digital print, 120 x 96cm
8. *Attending to What Falls* 2022, wood, metal, tissue paper, latex, fabric, mud
9. *The Sound Within: Twangs and Tinkerings* 2022, digital audio soundscape, duration: 17min 53sec
10. *Teardrops of Mind: Pink, Yellow, Blue* 2022, plaster, resin, paint, fabric
11. *A Mothering Song* 2021, plaster, wood, mineral sands, string, tree knot
12. *The Play of Letting Go* 2021, anti-fabric, wood, knots
13. *A Sideways Glimpse of Something* 2021, anti-fabric, wood, knots, metal
14. *Stepping Through the Unknown* 2021, anti-fabric, wood, knots, bark, limestone (aka Koorlong diamond)
15. *Holding the In-between* 2021, anti-fabric, wood, knots, metal, latex
16. *Of Halos and Ripples* 2022, anti-fabric, clay, wood, knots, string
17. *The Gentle Balance Between Here and There* 2022, latex, clay, wood, string, anti-fabric
18. *Untitled* 2022, anti-fabric, wood, knots, metal, limestone, resin
19. *Protecting #II* 2022, plaster, paint, wood, clay, mud, resin, doll
20. *Protecting #I* 2021, oil painting on canvas
21. *Shamum: Rituals, Relics, and Burdens* 2022, hemp-silk fabric, oil painting, necklaces (from the performance *We wait what else can we do?* 2019)
22. *Embracing* 2022, anti-fabric, string, thread
23. *Knots as Cosmos of Little Beating Hearts* 2022, plaster, natural dyes
24. *That Mutuality of Something Between Us (Detail)* 2022, wood, string, mud ball, knots, anti-fabric
25. *Inside Knots Like Bones* 2022, fabric knotting, acrylic paint, anti-fabric

26. *A Delicate Enfolding of Blood and Heart* 2022, anti-fabric, resin, knots
27. *Dancing with Shadows and Shields # I, II, & III* 2022, heat-treated anti-fabric
28. *Held Up* 2022, sandstone, resin, salt, bug wings, sap, mica
29. *Journeying to the Self of Someplace Else* 2022, bisque fired river mud, wooden stands, paint
30. *A Gathering of Elements and Inarticulate Frames in the Listening Ears of Mutable Passage* 2022, pressed clay, air dried clay, ashes, burnt wood, plaster, peppercorns, salt, plaster, resin, vinyl, limestone (aka Karadoc diamonds), wood, glass, wire, tissue paper, mud